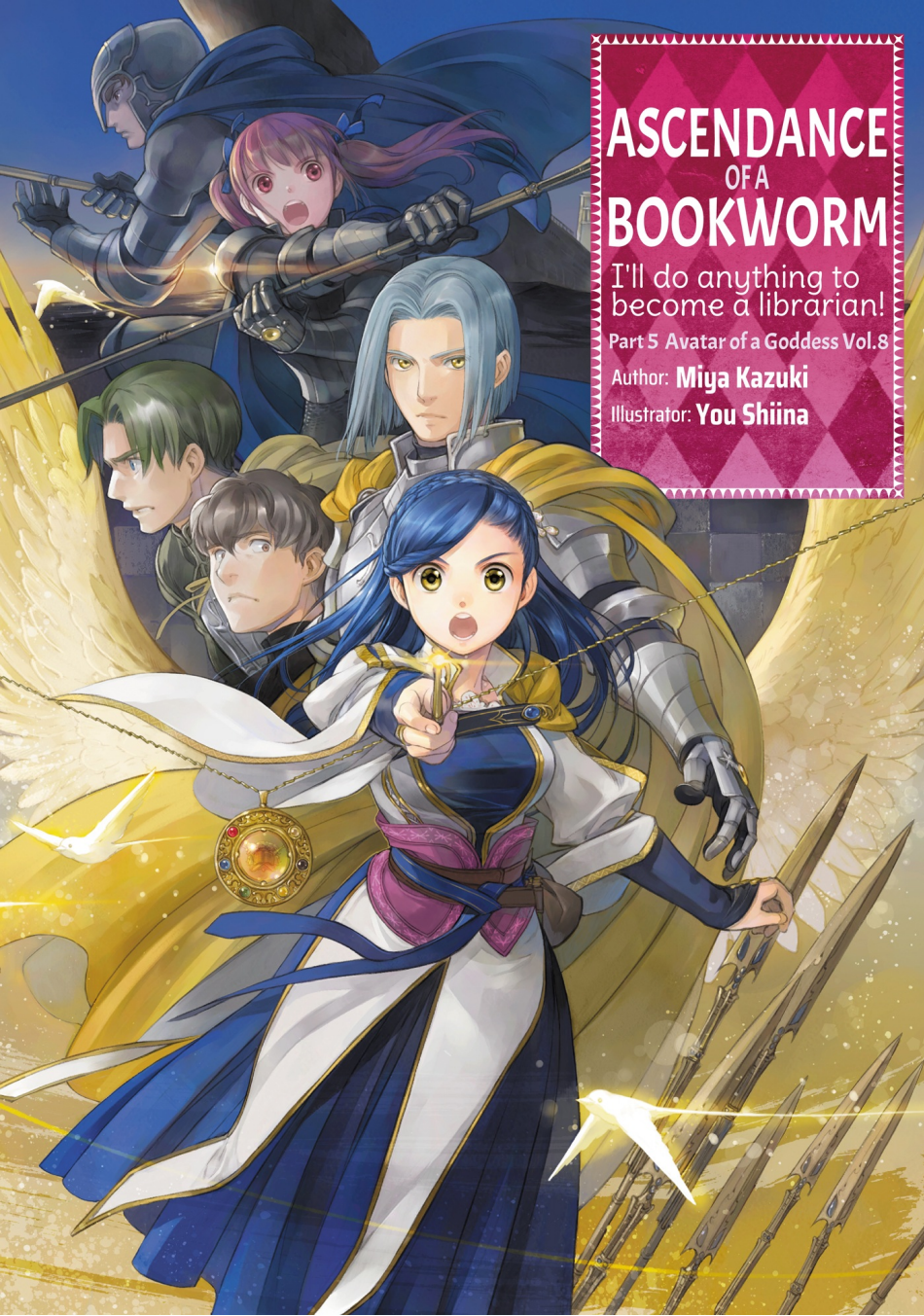




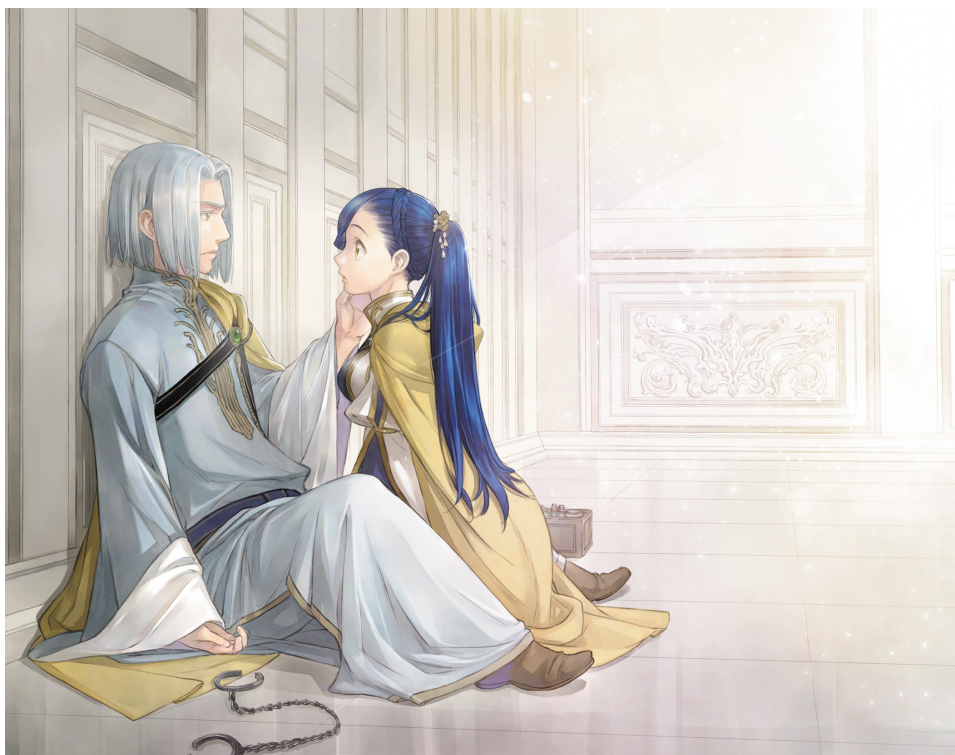
ASCENDANCE OF A BOOKWORM

I'll do anything to
become a librarian!

Part 5 Avatar of a Goddess Vol.8

Author: **Miya Kazuki**

Illustrator: **You Shiina**





Cast of Characters

Summary of Part Four:

At the Royal Academy, Rozemyne has become both a problem child and a top-ranking student. She took ownership of the library's magic tools through a blessing, played affter against a greater duchy, advised royally on matters of romance, defeated a Darkness feybeast, and healed the Ehrenfest gathering spot, among so many other things. Meanwhile, at the guidance of the Sovereign knight commander, who knows that Ferdinand is a seed of Adalgisa, the king orders Ferdinand to leave Ehrenfest and marry into another duchy. Now, Ferdinand must endure a new life in Ahrensbach.



Wilfried

Sylvester's son, Rozemyne's older brother, and a fourth-year.



Rozemyne

The protagonist. Divine intervention means she now looks old enough to have come of age, but she's the same on the inside and will do anything to read books. A fourth-year.

Ehrenfest's Archducal Family



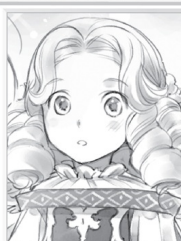
Sylvester

The archduke of Ehrenfest. He adopted Rozemyne, making him her adoptive father.



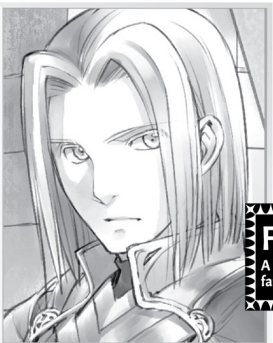
Florencia

Sylvester's wife and the mother of his three children. Rozemyne's adoptive mother.



Charlotte

Sylvester's daughter, Rozemyne's little sister, and a third-year.



Melchior

Sylvester's son. Rozemyne's little brother.

Bonifatius

Sylvester's uncle, Karstedt's father, and Rozemyne's grandfather.

Ferdinand

A member of the Ehrenfest archducal family. Sent to Ahrensbach by royal decree.

**Otilie**

Head attendant.
Hartmut's mother.

**Lieseleta**

Angelica's little sister
and a medattendant.

**Gretia**

A fifth-year apprentice
medattendant. Gave her
name.

**Hartmut**

An archscholar and
the new High Priest.
Otilie's son.

**Clarissa**

An archscholar.
Engaged to Hartmut.

**Roderick**

A fourth-year apprentice
medscholar. Gave his
name.

**Philine**

A fourth-year apprentice
layscholar.

**Cornelius**

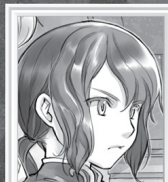
Karstedt's son and an
archknight.

**Leonore**

An archknight.
Engaged to Cornelius.

**Angelica**

Lieseleta's older sister
and a medknight.

**Matthias**

A medknight. Gave his
name.

**Laurenz**

A fifth-year apprentice
medknight. Gave his
name.

**Judithe**

A fifth-year apprentice
medknight.

**Damuel**

A layknight.

**Bertilde**

A first-year apprentice
archattendant.
Brunhilde's little sister.

Rozemyne's Retainers

Ehrenfest's Nobility

Brunhilde

.....Rozemyne's former retainer and Sylvester's fiancée.

Rihyarda

.....Sylvester's archattendant.

Karstedt

.....Ehrenfest's knight commander. Rozemyne's noble father.

Elvira

.....Karstedt's first wife. Rozemyne's noble mother.

Lasfam

.....Ferdinand's layattendant.

Eckhart

.....Ferdinand's guard knight. Karstedt's son.

Justus

.....Ferdinand's attendant and scholar. Rihyarda's son.

Veronica

.....Sylvester's mother. Currently detained.

Brigitte

.....Rozemyne's former retainer and Giebe Illgner's little sister.

Viktor

.....Brigitte's husband.

Dirk

.....A mednoble apprentice blue priest. Delia's little brother.

Bertram

.....A mednoble apprentice blue priest. Laurenz's little brother.

Ahrensbach's Nobility

Georgine

.....Ahrensbach's first wife. Sylvester's older sister.

Detlinde

.....A member of the Ahrensbach archducal family.
Georgine's daughter.

Letizia

.....A member of the Ahrensbach archducal family.

Strahl

.....Ferdinand's archknight. Formerly the knight commander.

Sergius

.....Ferdinand's attendant.

Raimund

.....A fifth-year apprentice medscholar.

Fairseele

.....Letizia's apprentice archattendant. Strahl's daughter.

Fraularm

.....An archnoble. Formerly a professor of the Royal Academy.

Grausam

.....A scholar who gave his name to Georgine.
Formerly Giebe Gerlach.

Seltier

.....An attendant who gave her name to Georgine.
Grausam's little sister.

Temple Associates

Fran.....In charge of the High Bishop's chambers.

Monika.....A cook who helps in the High Bishop's chambers.

Nicola.....A cook who helps in the High Bishop's chambers.

Gil.....In charge of the workshop.

Wilma.....In charge of the orphanage.

Konrad.....An orphan. Philine's little brother.

Nobles from Other Duchies

Sigiswald

.....The Sovereignty's first prince. The next Zent.

Hirschur

.....Ehrenfest's dormitory supervisor.

Sieglinde

.....Dunkelfelger's first wife.

Lestilaut

.....A member of Dunkelfelger's archducal family.

Hannelore

.....A fourth-year archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger.

Heisschitz

.....An archknight from Dunkelfelger.

Others

Leonzio.....An envoy from Lanzenave.

Volk.....A former gray priest with a family in Illgner.

Lower City Associates

Gunther.....Myne's dad.

Effa.....Myne's mom and personal seamstress.

Tuuli.....Myne's older sister and personal hairpin craftswoman.

Kamil.....Myne's little brother.

Lutz.....Tuuli's fiancé.

Benno.....Head of the Plantin Company.

Corinna.....A seamstress for the Gilberta Company.

Ella.....Rozemyne's personal chef. On maternity leave.

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Prologue

So monotonous and unchanging was life in Ahrensbach that each day seemed to blend seamlessly into the next. Still, Justus knew from experience that even the steadiest streak of normalcy could crumble under the weight of a single momentous event. Several such examples came unbidden to mind: the moment he had proposed giving his name to Ferdinand to secure the man's trust, the sudden death of the late Aub Ehrenfest that had seen Ferdinand expelled from noble society, the royal decree that had uprooted them all, and now...

"Lady Letizia?! Have you finished supplying mana already?!"

"Please open the door. I am in a hurry."

Justus exchanged a look with Eckhart. Letizia was meant to be supplying mana, so why could they hear her on the other side of the door?

Although their lord, Ferdinand, had yet to marry Ahrensbach's Detlinde, he was still supplying the duchy's foundation. A short while ago, he had gone into its Mana Replenishment hall to help train Letizia and privately discuss something with her.

During Mana Replenishment, only archnoble retainers belonging to a branch of the duchy's archducal family were allowed inside the archduke's office. Eckhart and Justus had consequently been advised to rest, but instead, they were waiting diligently outside the door. They had been ordered not to let Detlinde pass and to inform their lord at once if she tried.

"Could something have happened...?"

"Surely not. You-know-who isn't around."

Detlinde had yet to make an appearance, so neither Eckhart nor Justus expected any trouble. Only when Letizia rushed out to meet them did they realize just how wrong they were. In her hand was the cage Ferdinand always wore on his hip. It contained the feystone for his highbeast and three name stones enveloped in what appeared to be white cocoons.

"Lord Ferdinand, he... he said to go..." she squeaked.

Justus took in a sharp breath, then struggled to breathe at all. He could hear a loud ringing in his ears. Letizia's claim was unthinkable, but if she was telling the truth... Normalcy was about to crumble once again.

Life in Ahrensbach had seemed more frustrating than not: Detlinde was repugnant, Lanzenave's envoys lorded over everyone, there hadn't been any food shipments since Rozemyne's disappearance, and Ferdinand was in a terrible state. Only now that it was gone did Justus realize it had actually been quite peaceful.

Lord Ferdinand...!

Justus snatched the cage from Letizia and peered inside. There was no mistaking it—these were their feystones. He couldn't imagine Ferdinand giving them to anyone unless the situation was truly dire.

But what could the situation be? How did it come about?

As his mind went blank, Justus suddenly remembered a warning from his lord: *"If ever my life is in danger, I will return your names to you. This will spare you the same fate—but more than that, it will allow you to inform Ehrenfest of anything we have learned. Carry out that duty without fail."* Given the circumstances, the words seemed more prophetic than ever.

Justus stared down at the cage in his left hand, then gave his chest a quick pat with his right. The slight crinkle he heard confirmed that the form permitting them to use Ahrensbach's teleportation circle and the records to be given to Aub Ehrenfest were still in his breast pocket. Coupled with the name stones, he now had everything he needed to prove Ferdinand was in danger.

Do we really have to go? Right now?

Justus's entire body began to tremble. His teeth chattered while his legs refused to move, not wanting to abandon their lord even when ordered to. He didn't know what had occurred in the Mana Replenishment hall. Ferdinand was alive, at least, but he was clearly in grave danger, and neither Justus nor Eckhart could rush to his rescue.

"You," Eckhart growled. "What have you done to Lord Ferdinand?"

"Eep...!"

The dark, menacing voice had come from Justus's compatriot. Eckhart was grabbing at Letizia while her guards moved to protect her. A fight was ready to break out at any moment.

This idiot!

Seeing his colleague's white-hot anger pulled Justus back to his senses. He couldn't let Eckhart draw his weapon—and with that newfound resolve, his legs finally moved. He reached out and grabbed the furious knight by the collar.

“ECKHART! Forget this interrogation! Our orders come first, and what did our lord tell us to do?!”

The outburst took Eckhart by surprise, but it did nothing to soothe his anger. He gritted his teeth and glared at Letizia.

There was no time to wait for Eckhart to cool down; unless they made a quick escape, he would surely be imprisoned for turning his weapon on a member of Ahrensbach's archducal family.

I can't let that be how this ends.

Justus glanced between Letizia and the door, then turned on his heel and started running to the teleportation hall. Even when Strahl and Sergius sprinted out of the archduke's office and gave chase, he ignored their shouts; slowing down and getting caught wasn't an option.

“This way.”

Running through the castle would arouse suspicion, so once they'd shaken their pursuers, Justus urged his now silent companion down a narrow corridor meant for servants, then slowed to a more natural pace. He smiled and waved at the passing servants as if nothing were the matter while taking his name stone from its cage.

“Justus?!” Eckhart exclaimed.

“Unless I free my name stone, I'll ascend to the towering heights before I can do as Lord Ferdinand instructed.”

Eckhart's eyebrows shot up in anger as he cried, “Don't say that!”

Paying his fellow retainer no mind, Justus got to work. The white cocoon unraveled as he extracted Ferdinand's mana, exposing the name stone within. The mana enveloping him vanished at the same time. He normally didn't think much about it, but its absence weighed heavily on him.

“I'll carry out his last wish no matter what it takes,” Justus said. “If you want to die with him, that's fine by me. I'm more than willing to give your feystone to Lord Karstedt or Lady Elvira when giving my report to Lord Sylvester.”

Eckhart grimaced at the thought of dying so shamefully and

returning home a failure. Then he held out a hand and said, “Give it to me. Once we’ve delivered the information and evidence Lord Ferdinand gathered to Aub Ehrenfest, I’ll find out whether he’s still alive. If not... I’ll ascend with him.”

“Sounds good to me,” Justus replied; such a bold response was completely in character for his fellow retainer. One could identify one’s own name stone from its mana but not someone else’s, so he simply handed over the cage.

“This one,” Eckhart said in short order. His hand shook as he plucked out a name stone.

Justus retrieved the cage in silence and continued down the corridor at a brisk pace, though he cast a side-glance at his compatriot. Eckhart was undoing his name-swearing with tears in his eyes. He was trembling so violently now that one would notice even at a distance.

Eckhart had lost both his first wife, Heidemarie, and their unborn child when poison was mixed into their food. Back then, he had tried to follow them in death—but as he was a name-sworn, his life wasn’t his own. Ferdinand had ordered him to live for Heidemarie and to fill the void made by her passing.

Heidemarie had always declared with a smile that she and Eckhart would tend to Ferdinand as a married couple, so ever since her death, Eckhart had thrown himself entirely into serving his lord. It had become his life’s purpose to act as if she were there with him, doing the same.

This is going to hurt him more than it did me...

Eckhart needed to unseal the name stone proving his loyalty—the greatest indicator that he was willing to put his life on the line for his lord. Few would understand the true depth of misery he felt at having his lack of resolve thrust in his face.

And that leaves Lasfam...

Justus looked at the last name stone sitting in the cage. Lasfam was still in Ehrenfest; as a mere layattendant, he wouldn’t have been able to protect himself in Ahrensbach, so he had been told to wait until Ferdinand was married and secure in his position as the archduchess’s first husband. He probably felt worse than anyone about the Starbinding having been delayed.

Worst of all, I wasn’t even able to keep the promise I made him.

Justus’s words to Lasfam echoed in his mind: “I’ll make moves so that Ahrensbach’s retainers won’t reject you for being a laynoble. Lady

Georgine's plotting something—we hear only bad things about her—but I'll make sure Lord Ferdinand remains safe."

In the end, neither he nor Eckhart had managed to protect their lord.

I wonder if we'll manage to return Lasfam's name stone in time...

If something happened to the stone, it would mean that Ferdinand was dead. It was impossible to predict whether they would get it back to Lasfam before that happened.

Just thinking about Ferdinand passing away made bile rise in Justus's throat. Unpleasant though it was, he had no choice but to swallow it down; otherwise, his tears, anger, and despair would spill out with it. He would end up crippled and unable to move, so he focused on methodically working his legs, telling himself again and again that his lord's last wish took priority.

Upon reaching the door leading out of the servants' corridors, Justus paused and sighed. He refocused and put on his usual breezy grin. The teleportation hall was near; he couldn't give the knights there reason to believe something was amiss.

"Eckhart, your emotions are showing on your face. Grind that anger down. Our story is that we're visiting Raimund for Lord Ferdinand."

They would need to be on guard in case the knights had already been alerted of the situation by ordonnanz, but that seemed unlikely. Letizia had seemed confused and uncertain when bringing out the name stones, so her explanation of everything that had occurred would surely take a while. Moreover, anyone who wished to join the search for Eckhart and Justus would need to contact Ferdinand in the Mana Replenishment hall and then get permission from Detlinde. They had much greater priorities than contacting the teleportation hall.

"Oh, visiting the Royal Academy again?" asked one of the knights on guard outside the door.

"Indeed," Justus replied. "We are returning work that has been checked and delivering these materials to Professor Hirschur. She has a tendency to snatch whatever ingredients she needs for brewing from our lord, her disciple. It never fails to be troublesome, I must say."

As expected, the teleportation hall was still unaware; the two knights blinked in surprise at their unexpected guests but began activating the teleporter without question when Justus showed

them his permission form.

“You aren’t with Lord Ferdinand this time, I see,” one of the knights casually remarked. “Is it not rare for you two Ehrenfest retainers to leave his side?”

Few nobles used the teleportation circle outside of term time and the Archduke Conference, so the knights guarding the teleporter were well aware that Raimund spent much of the year sequestered in the Hirschur Laboratory, that Ferdinand was treating him as a disciple, and that Detlinde had granted them permits to use the magic circle. Still, up until now, they hadn’t gone to the Royal Academy without Ferdinand.

Justus shrugged, hoping to ease the knight’s concerns. “He now has Strahl among his guards, and nothing is going to happen during Mana Replenishment; I see no reason to worry about our taking a moment away. Professor Hirschur often makes us brew with her, in any case, so this duty would prove too much for those who don’t know how to deal with her.”

“Come again?” The knight contacting the other end of the teleporter blinked a few times in surprise. “She makes *knights and attendants* brew...?”

“Indeed she does. Lord Ferdinand was made to help the entire time he was at the Royal Academy. I am an attendant, but I can brew on the level of a scholar. This errand might end up lasting all night—a terrifying thought.”

The knight chuckled. “Sounds like our joint research with Ehrenfest is going to be quite an ordeal.”

Once the Royal Academy had been contacted, the knights smiled and gestured Eckhart and Justus onto the teleportation circle. At once, the two retainers were enveloped in black and golden fire. There was a slight floating sensation... and with that, they left Ahrensbach’s castle behind.

Having arrived at the Royal Academy, Eckhart and Justus smiled at the knights on duty and then exited the teleportation hall. They started slow, then sped up when they were far away enough that their footfalls wouldn’t be heard.

Justus took out the magic letter he had kept on his person without fail since their arrival in Ahrensbach. It bore Sylvester’s signature and granted them permission to use Ehrenfest’s tea party room when circumstances became dire and they needed to flee.

“Eckhart,” he said, nodding toward a nearby table, “get that

vase out of the way.”

Once the table was clear, Justus spread out the letter, transformed his schtappe into a pen, and then wrote his name and a request to meet Aub Ehrenfest to inform him of an emergency. From there, he passed the sheet to Eckhart, who signed his name as well.

Justus sealed the magic letter in an envelope, which transformed into a white bird and took flight. He and Eckhart then sprinted through the dormitory as if chasing it. There wasn't a single person around to chastise them.

After leaving the dormitory through the entrance hall, the two retainers ran through the central building to Ehrenfest's tea party room. They waited in front of the door marked with an eight until the guard who had evidently received their letter rushed to open it for them.

“We have contacted Aub Ehrenfest,” he said. “Please wait here.”

The knight then returned to the Ehrenfest Dormitory. Eckhart and Justus were unable to follow, since they didn't have the necessary registration brooches. All they could do was wait in the tea party room for Sylvester to arrive.

Justus looked around, then rearranged the tables and chairs into something more suitable for their meeting. Once done, he flopped down into one of the seats. It wasn't a graceful gesture by any means, but his body was too heavy for him to worry about acting like a noble.

“I wonder whether Lasfam's still with us...” Eckhart muttered.

Justus looked at the cage. The name stone was inside and unchanged, which meant Ferdinand was still alive. It was good news, but Justus couldn't help feeling wretched that he was sitting around doing nothing.

Our coming here won't save Lord Ferdinand.

The information they held would secure their positions back in Ehrenfest and provide a strong enough basis for them to launch an attack on Ahrensbach... but it wouldn't rescue their lord. There was nobody in the whole world who could save Ferdinand while he was trapped in another duchy's Mana Replenishment hall—not Aub Ehrenfest, and not the Grutrissheit-lacking Zent.

Lord Ferdinand suffered so much for such a long time, and what does he have to show for it? No one cares about his predicament.

Justus was enraged. The Zent responsible for giving the royal

decree had taken an enormous step back, and now that Rozemyne was gone, Ehrenfest had stopped sending intelligence, food, and potions. Their utter lack of consideration was unforgivable.

At that moment, Justus resolved to take action. Unless their meeting with Sylvester went especially well, he would return to Ahrensbach and take revenge on its archducal family. He didn't care how much trouble it would cause Ehrenfest; as far as he was concerned, nobody in Ahrensbach deserved to be forgiven. Not Detlinde, who had made others perform her duties in her reluctance to carry out her role. Not the Lanzenave envoys, who had enabled her madness and made life increasingly difficult for Ferdinand. And not Letizia or those around her, who had put Ferdinand in grave danger despite everything he had done to tutor her.

Detlinde and Letizia would die. Justus was overwhelmed with a burning desire to assassinate them both and end Ahrensbach's archducal family once and for all. The Zent could then scramble to hold together whatever remained of the greater duchy.

"Justus, what are you thinking about?" Eckhart asked.

"The traps I'll set in Ahrensbach's castle and where I'll place them."

"If you're going to kill them, do it personally. You don't want them exploiting the chaos to escape."

"The plan is to leave one escape route open, then take them out right when they feel safe."

Eckhart and Justus laughed at the thought. Perhaps an outsider would assume they were in good spirits, but their eyes were brimming with hatred, and as they fought to keep their emotions from exploding out, the atmosphere grew sharp and overwhelming.

The door suddenly clicked open, and several attendants announced their presence. "We apologize for our knight's lack of consideration," they said. "To think he would abandon our visitors without even serving them tea..." Then they began making drinks in preparation for the aub's arrival.

"The knight cannot be blamed," Justus replied. "We arrived at a closed dormitory without prior notice. That aside, when will Aub Ehrenfest be here?"

The attendants preparing sweets gave bemused smiles. "At once. We were put in quite a rush."

"I'm here," Sylvester announced nary a moment later. To both Eckhart's and Justus's surprise, he truly had arrived straight away.

Justus glanced at Lasfam's name stone. It was still unchanged.

"The tea's done, right?" Sylvester asked the attendants. "Clear the room and start getting ready for later." Judging by the urgency in his voice, he was in as much of a hurry as Eckhart and Justus.

As the attendants filtered out, Sylvester placed two sound-blockers on the table—one each for his two guests. Once all three of them had one in hand, Justus spoke.

"Aub Ehrenfest, Lord Ferdinand has been—"

"Poisoned? Yes, Rozemyne told me."

Eckhart and Justus both stared at him in shock.

"Lady Rozemyne told you? We were told she was missing..."

"And who told you that? We've been going to great lengths to keep that information under wraps."

Sylvester was fixing them both with a demanding stare, but Eckhart shook his head. "Lord Ferdinand comes first," he said, trying to change the subject.

Justus likewise attempted to ignore the question, so as not to reveal their source, but Sylvester was persistent: "We were withholding the news as per an order from royalty. So again, who told you? They might be spreading it further as we speak."

"It was Professor Hirschur," Justus answered, having no other choice. "She told us in exchange for assistance with her brewing."

Sylvester frowned and said, "We'll need to be careful with her." He then heaved a drawn-out sigh, though it was clear from his slightly relieved expression that he was glad the information hadn't come from somewhere more worrying. "Oh, by the by—these are from Rozemyne. They should make you look a little less haggard."

Sylvester set two rejuvenation potions on the table, which Eckhart and Justus immediately accepted; they had been running low in Ahrensbach and struggling to decide when to use their remaining stock. The potions tasted awful, but they were extra reinvigorating.

"How in the world was Lady Rozemyne aware of what happened...?" Justus asked. "We used the teleporter and came here almost immediately after Lord Ferdinand was harmed."

"She received his last testament," Sylvester replied.

"What?!"

A person on the brink of death could use mana to broadcast their situation to another. Such broadcasts were sent unconsciously to whomever the sender had the strongest feelings for, and they

allowed the recipient to experience whatever was happening as though they were actually there. In most cases, they occurred in the midst of a battle—and because the person who sent the broadcast was almost never saved, the phenomenon had come to be known as a last testament.

In other words, Rozemyne had seen something that Eckhart and Justus never would.

“Do you know where Georgine is now?” Sylvester asked. “According to Rozemyne, she’s the one who devised this plan to dispatch Ferdinand.”

Resisting the urge to grind his teeth, Justus replied, “She left her villa about ten days ago to perform Spring Prayer.” Her recent absence coupled with the fact she seldom communicated with Letizia meant that neither he nor Eckhart had even suspected she was involved.

“Then she could be in Ehrenfest by tomorrow,” Sylvester said, letting out another heavy sigh.

“Was Lady Georgine truly behind all this?”

“Yeah. Rozemyne said as much. She also told us that Detlinde threw the poison powder at Ferdinand.”

Lady Detlinde? But it was Lady Letizia in there with him.

Detlinde hadn’t entered the Mana Replenishment hall; Ferdinand had gone to extreme lengths to ensure she wouldn’t be anywhere near the aub’s office. There were some disparities between what Rozemyne had seen and what Eckhart and Justus understood—but before Justus could ask for more information, Sylvester grinned.

“By the way—Rozemyne’s heading out to save Ferdinand. As soon as the date changes.”

“Excuse me?”

Justus could only widen his eyes in shock. He was convinced that nobody in the world could save Ferdinand when he was trapped in the Mana Replenishment hall of another duchy. The very idea was almost laughable.



“Do you believe she’ll stand a chance?” he eventually managed. “She’s just a little girl.”

“Huh? Not anymore. She’s all grown up. You won’t believe your eyes when you see her.”

Eckhart and Justus hadn’t seen Rozemyne since the Interduchy Tournament before last, more than a year ago. She was sure to have grown since then, but that wasn’t what Justus had meant.

“Did she seem confident?” he asked.

“She outright Crushed Bonifatius when he first refused to help her, and made arrangements to leave under cover of darkness. Something she saw must have given her this confidence. At the very least, she believes it’s possible.”

Rozemyne had declared that she would save Ferdinand—and she was leaving tonight. Just knowing that there was still a chance made the tension drain from Justus’s body. His muscles began to relax, and the all-encompassing darkness that had descended upon him while he was waiting for Sylvester completely vanished. He was so relieved to have hope that he wanted to cry.

“Lord Ferdinand gave us a message for Lady Rozemyne,” Justus said. “He said that as long as Ehrenfest remains patient and does not make any drastic moves, both it and the country at large can be saved. Knowing that, will she still take action?”

“Do you think a mere message would be enough to stop Rozemyne?” Sylvester asked with an amused snort. “Once her rampage is over, Ferdinand is going to have the headache of a lifetime cleaning up the mess she’s made. And he’ll only have himself to blame for getting in trouble in the first place.”

Eckhart and Justus both gave wry smiles, recalling how Ferdinand would tap his temples when planning how to deal with Rozemyne’s unpredictable behavior. It was easy to imagine he would pinch her cheeks upon being saved and ask why she hadn’t listened to him.

That girl is just too interesting.

Once again, Rozemyne’s actions had easily exceeded anything Ferdinand could anticipate or plan for. Her outrageous decision to rush into Ahrensbach filled Justus with exhilaration; because of the opportunity she had created, his mind was flooded with thoughts of what he could do to help save his lord. Sticking to the proper

channels wouldn't achieve much. Instead, like Rozemyne, they needed to use everything at their disposal, paying no mind as to how much it would anger Ferdinand or disrupt their surroundings. The rescue operation was their top priority—and with so many tools available to them, there had to be *something* they could do.

Ah. And there it is.

It would infuriate Ferdinand and perhaps even frustrate Rozemyne a little, but it was now or never. In one fell swoop, they would assist Rozemyne, save their lord, and even repay him for their failures. The idea brought a smile to Justus's face.

But beside him, Eckhart was wearing a hard expression. "Rozemyne's plan constitutes an invasion of another duchy. Have you permitted that as Ehrenfest's aub?"

"Yep. I've said that Rozemyne and her retainers can move as they like. It hurts to admit, but with Georgine's invasion due any moment now, Ehrenfest can't provide any more strength than that."

Upon hearing that Sylvester had given his permission, Eckhart put his face in his hands and exhaled. At last, his unease was ebbing away. He took some time to breathe deeply before kneeling before Sylvester, taking the aub's hand, and pressing the back against his forehead.

"You would invade a greater duchy to save Lord Ferdinand... I thank you from the bottom of my heart. It pleases me to no end that he has a man with such unwavering resolve as his brother. Truly it does..."

Outside of a formal occasion, it was extremely rare for Eckhart to bend the knee to anyone other than Ferdinand. Sylvester knew that and thus understood the depth of the man's gratitude. His green eyes softened.

"I'll accept your gratitude, but we haven't saved him yet. The battle starts here," Sylvester said, much to Eckhart's surprise. He took back his hand, then gestured the knight back to his seat. "I've got a meeting with the royal family coming up. I'm hoping we'll obtain their permission—but even if we don't, Rozemyne won't stop."

"And you would accept that as the aub?" Eckhart asked, his expression becoming more rigid as he sat down again.

"You two came all this way while your lord was in danger. You must have brought something of value, right? Give it here." Securing the royal family's permission to invade Ahrensbach and

smite Lanzenave would require concrete evidence, and Sylvester was confident that Ferdinand had gathered some.

Eckhart glanced at Justus, who took several sound-recording magic tools from his bags and then pulled the reports from his inner pocket. “These were meant to be used during the Archduke Conference to decry Lady Detlinde as unfit to rule Ahrensbach, but if you also mention their archducal family’s growing collusion with Lanzenave and the harm that has come to Lord Ferdinand, the royals shouldn’t be able to protest.”

Justus started going over the documents, at which point an ordonnanz flew into the room. It was a message from the first prince. Sylvester looked from the bird to the two retainers.

“Everyone’s gathering at Ferdinand’s estate. Well, I guess it’s Rozemyne’s library now. Go meet up with them. They went there to prepare instead of coming here.”

Sylvester then set registration brooches on the table—indicators that Eckhart and Justus were to be treated as Ehrenfest nobles. It spoke volumes that he had chosen to bring them to the dormitory before even hearing what his two visitors had to say.

He continued, “Rozemyne’s chances will shoot up if she has people who know the layout of Ahrensbach’s castle and can guide her to the Mana Replenishment hall. Save your lord. Save my little brother. I’m counting on you both.”

“We will. We’ll save him. No matter what.”

Uniting

After concluding my discussion with Aub Dunkelfelger and speaking with Sylvester about Eckhart and Justus's arrival, I exited the archduke's office and reunited with Cornelius, Hartmut, and Lieseleta. My first course of action was to create my Pandabus; I still wasn't confident in my ability to stride gracefully down the hall, especially while I was in a hurry.

"We have secured Dunkelfelger's support and shall depart for Ahrensbach tonight," I said while driving. "Do any of you know how the archducal family's meeting went?"

"Lady Florencia began using contract magic to swear the knights and other retainers who heard you grow emotional and reveal critical information to silence," Cornelius replied. "An ordonnanz from the aub arrived partway through, informing us that Aub Dunkelfelger had agreed to help, that we would be going to Kirnberger in the dead of the night, and that he needed to hurry to the Royal Academy. What happened...?"

"I will explain the details later, but the news is anything but bad," I replied, blocking his question with a smile. I didn't reveal that Eckhart and Justus had arrived in Ehrenfest as we made our way back to my chambers; instead, I turned to Hartmut, who was on my other side. "Hartmut, have my knights gather in my chambers at once."

"To discuss invading Ahrensbach, I expect? They have already been instructed to drop whatever they are doing and make their way here. Those who were stationed in the temple should arrive soon—with the exception of Philine and Roderick, who are staying behind to keep an eye on things."

Hartmut gave his report so nonchalantly that I did a double take at him. "V-Very good..." was the most I could manage in response.

"Being able to assist you is reward enough, my lady."

By the time we arrived at my chambers, the knights were already there waiting for me. I gazed across them all. Those who

were gasping for breath must have come full pelt all the way from the temple.

“Um, Lady Rozemyne...” one of them said. “Lord Hartmut told us only that you have an urgent announcement to make.”

“Indeed,” I replied. “I realize this is sudden, but we shall invade Ahrensbach and steal its foundation *tonight*.”

“Come again...?”

They couldn’t be blamed for their surprise; the situation had changed quite a lot since the morning. Not even I had expected this turn of events.

I explained the circumstances for my retainers who hadn’t attended the meeting: Georgine was almost certainly about to invade Ehrenfest; Ferdinand was poisoned and stuck in Ahrensbach’s replenishment hall; we were going to launch a rescue operation tonight; I’d used Sylvester’s authority to get Dunkelfelger on our side; and we would soon be reuniting with Eckhart and Justus. It was impossible not to feel the urgency.

Everyone looked tense as I started giving out instructions. There wasn’t much time before we needed to go.

“First, the placement of my attendants,” I said. “Lieseleta, Gretia, head to the library. Ottilie, Bertilde, I want you to stay at the castle. Ottilie’s group in particular should prepare my highbeast riding clothes, shoes, and all the feystones and magic tools around us. I plan to eat and rest in the library afterward, so arrange for the chefs to be moved there.”

“Lady Rozemyne, how many are going to eat with you?” Ottilie asked. “Food will need to be sent as well.”

I gazed around the room and tried to count, but Lieseleta stopped me. “Ottilie, move as much there as you can,” she said. “We will see if we have enough in the library. If not, I will contact Lady Elvira. She will surely leap at the chance to help us once she learns that Lord Eckhart is returning.”

She and Ottilie then began assigning work between themselves.

“After we depart, continue gathering information in the lead-up to Georgine’s invasion. Remain in contact with Florencia, Brunhilde, and Charlotte.”

“Understood.”

Ottilie smiled and said, “This certainly is sudden.” Then she got straight to work. Bertilde, in contrast, wasn’t used to the craziness of serving me. She simply followed along while blinking in

bewilderment.

“In that case, Lady Rozemyne, shall Gretia and I go to the library and start getting things ready with Lasfam?” Lieseleta asked.

“Indeed,” I replied. “Your wit is quick. Eckhart and Justus will also need to eat and rest, so your assistance will go a long way.”

“As you will. Time is short, so you must excuse me, but do bring some guard knights when you come to the library. And take care not to give instructions to all of your retainers, or else you won’t have any left with you.”

Lieseleta then left with Gretia.

“Hartmut, Clarissa,” I said, “distribute the magic tools and rejuvenation potions we made to everyone, then—”

“We have enough ready that we can leave at any moment,” Clarissa enthusiastically interjected. “Fear not—once they are distributed, Hartmut and I will take turns resting.”

I was surprised to hear that Hartmut planned to join the fight. Clarissa was a given, since she was a scholar of the sword from Dunkelfelger, but Hartmut was just a regular scholar. I turned to look at him.

“Lady Rozemyne,” he said, “you would struggle to manage the abundance of magic tools and potions stored inside your highbeast on your own, especially if we also intend to supply Dunkelfelger. Please bring me along so that you can focus on saving Lord Ferdinand.”

“Although I appreciate your resolve, I don’t believe a scholar should gleefully rush onto the battlefield,” I said, crossing my arms. He didn’t even have any ditter experience.

“Oh dear,” Hartmut chuckled. “I did not expect to hear that from a scholar and archduke candidate preparing to charge into battle.”

“Ngh... Time is of the essence, so if you slow down, expect to be left behind,” I declared, frustrated that I couldn’t argue.

Hartmut gave a composed smile. “That will not be a problem for me. I shall ride with you in your highbeast and manage the goods within.”

“You can count on us!” Clarissa exclaimed. “The strength I used to fly straight from Dunkelfelger to Ehrenfest is now in your hands.”

Nooo! That’s not an achievement you ought to be bragging about!

We would want to make a few more kinds of antidote before it came time for us to leave, so I sent Hartmut and Clarissa to the

library to do as they liked. I then looked over the guard knights I would be bringing with me to Ahrensbach.

“Laurenz, as you are underage, the choice is yours. You may come with me or stay behind.”

“You have my name, Lady Rozemyne,” Laurenz replied with a wry smile. “Please do not even consider leaving me behind.”

That must have inflamed Judithe’s sense of competition; she shot a hand up and cried, “I don’t want to be left behind either!”

Unfortunately for her, I couldn’t just let her tag along. To begin with, underage apprentice guard knights weren’t allowed to do jobs outside of the Noble’s Quarter. Through negotiations with Sylvester, I’d secured their permission to accompany me in the temple and remain on duty when I visited their hometowns, but invading another duchy was outside that purview.

“Because this is an emergency situation, you must first obtain your father’s permission,” I said. “I could not bring an underage apprentice to a battle in another duchy.”

“No waaay! Ngh... I’m sending him an ordonnanz at once!” She then rushed out of the room with tears in her eyes.

I addressed the remaining knights: “Those of you who are coming to Ahrensbach, take turns going to the knight dormitory to eat and rest in preparation. Of all the adult knights, only Damuel will remain here in Ehrenfest.”

The knights looked at him with wide eyes, then convened to discuss.

I went over to Damuel, who suddenly looked very out of place, and tugged on his cape. Then I gave him a sound-blocker and said, “There is a job I can entrust only to you.”

“Lady Rozemyne?”

“Stay in Ehrenfest and protect those who are most precious to me. Given her relationship with the former High Bishop, Lady Georgine might know about my family and the location of my home in the lower city. She might also have guessed that targeting them would wound me most.”

If someone put the pieces together—pieces such as my reason for entering the temple, my rush to rescue Charlotte, the spread of my trends, and my connections to the lower city—they would immediately be able to see what I cared about more than anything. And as I was still publicly considered to be Ehrenfest’s High Bishop, I was the biggest obstacle to anyone planning to infiltrate our

temple and steal our foundation. Their best move would be to eliminate me from the start or take my family and the Gutenbergs hostage to prevent my resistance.

“You knew me all the way back then, Damuel. There is nobody else I can ask. *Please.*”

“Understood. I... *did* promise Lord Ferdinand that I would.”

“Wait, you did...?” I asked.

Damuel gazed in the direction of Ahrensbach, as if seeing it across the horizon. “He came to speak with me before leaving Ehrenfest, since I’m the only one who knew you while you were an apprentice blue shrine maiden.”

Karstedt and Sylvester were both aware that I’d once been a commoner, but they had only briefly interacted with me back then. They certainly hadn’t spent time with me on a daily basis. Ferdinand might have given them reports on my life in the temple, but I doubted they truly understood my relationship with my family or how much I cared about them.

“He ordered me to protect your heart, Lady Rozemyne. Your emotional state. He also told me to make sure Hartmut didn’t do anything unnecessary after learning so much about you...” Damuel cast his eyes down a little to look at me and smiled. “Lord Ferdinand certainly is a demanding individual.”

Back when I first met him, he had to properly look down to meet my eyes. My head only went up to his stomach, and whenever he wanted to come down to my level, he had to kneel.

As I thought that, Damuel once again knelt—but not to make eye contact with me. He was looking down, so I could only see the top of his head.

“A proper guard knight would tell you to prioritize your safety and stay in Ehrenfest...” he began. Then he paused and gazed up at me. “Farewell, Lady Rozemyne. Do not waver on your path, and save Lord Ferdinand no matter what it takes. For his sake and your own. May all the gods bless you with their divine protection.”

“I thank you ever so much, Damuel. You were my first knight, and you have been my best knight ever since.”

Damuel nodded, then returned the sound-blocker and took his leave.

“Where’s he going?” Cornelius asked, looking at me suspiciously.

“To protect that which is most dear to me. He *is* my guard

knight, after all. Have you and the others decided the order in which you'll rest?"

They had, so I made my way to the library.

"Lady Rozemyne. I was wondering when you would return. Is Lord Ferdinand...?"

Lasfam must have already heard about the situation from my retainers; as soon as we had exchanged the usual greetings, he briskly approached me. Although he maintained the slight smile he always wore, his green eyes wavered amid an otherwise rigid expression. Anyone who was name-sworn would grow anxious upon learning that their lord was on the verge of death in another duchy.

"I understand your concerns, Lasfam, but you may rest easy knowing that I wrenched permission to save him from the archducal family and even convinced Dunkelfelger to assist us with the rescue," I said as we made our way to my chambers. "I expect both Eckhart and Justus to leave the Royal Academy and arrive here by sixth bell. Have rooms been prepared for them to rest in? We're also due to have more dinner guests than expected. Have the chefs arrived yet? Do we have enough food to serve?"

Lasfam responded to my barrage of questions with clear and precise answers. Preparations seemed to be going well.

"I must ask that you have everything ready before the others arrive," I said. "We will need to hear about Ahrensbach's situation while we eat dinner and then spend whatever time we have left making the last of our preparations."

"Understood," Lasfam replied, not a trace of anxiety in his voice. "I *will* complete everything by sixth bell."

But that wasn't all that I needed of him. "Please contact their homes to see whether they left any clothes behind. I expect they came here in such a hurry that they didn't grab much at all."

"I shall prepare a change of clothes for Lord Ferdinand as well. He might need it," Lasfam replied, more determined now that he had a goal in mind.

Leaving him to his work, I went into my chambers to carry out my own duties. Wandering around would only inconvenience my already busy retainers.

First, I sent an ordonnanz to Brigitte in Illgner. I explained that Ahrensbach had tried to dispatch Ferdinand and was likely about to invade and that Georgine was probably moving about in secret, then explained the function of the silver cloth our foe was sure to

use. I also asked her to gather as much information from her province's commoners as she could and to cooperate with the giebes of neighboring territories.

"If you notice anything suspicious on the border, inform us straight away," I concluded. "My grandfather can mobilize the Knight's Order at a moment's notice."

Her reply came not long afterward: "Lady Florencia has already contacted the giebes, but I thank you ever so much for your more detailed explanation. It was of great value. I shall inform the giebes around us and the commoners so that they know to be fully on guard."

I could gauge from Brigitte's response that the giebes didn't have a clear picture of the situation, so I sent another ordonnanz to Florencia asking her to reveal more information and to instruct Giebes Gerlach and Garduhn to strengthen their defenses.

Having sent all of my ordonnanzes, I went into my hidden room, formed the Book of Mestionora, and then began looking for a map of Ahrensbach. I wanted to see where its temple was in relation to its country gate. My search revealed the map used during the city's initial entwickeln and a detailed floor plan of Ahrensbach's temple, which told me everything I wanted to know.

Getting this book might have hurt like heck, but it was so worth it. There's so much useful information inside. Praise be to the gods!

I relished my satisfaction while copying and pasting the map and floor plan onto a piece of fey paper Clarissa had made for me. Analyzing maps wasn't a specialty of mine—I could wander around with one for ages and still not know anything about my current location or my destination—but I was sure that at least one of my knights would be able to help me out.

I wanted to check the floor plan for Ahrensbach's castle and replenishment hall, but nothing showed up. Such documents weren't altered except during the most extenuating circumstances, and the only time they were looked at was when the entwickeln was performed. Maybe it was in the section of the Book of Mestionora that had gone to Ferdinand.

"Guhhh... I don't have the most important part!"

But wailing wouldn't help me find it. Eckhart and Justus knew the layout, at least, so I would simply need to rely on them. I shook off my malaise and started copying and pasting any magic circles I found that seemed useful.

Several pastes later, the magic tool used to indicate when someone was calling for me shone. I stepped out of my hidden room to find Judithe, who reported with a sullen expression that she had been told to stay in Ehrenfest. It was hard to imagine her parents saying anything else.

“You don’t need to go to Ahrensbach to serve me as a knight,” I said. “I also need people here in Ehrenfest to protect those close to me.”

“That’s true, but...”

Knights must have viewed invading another duchy as a glorious and enviable job. Judithe seemed a lot more disappointed about having to stay behind than Damuel, who was putting his all into my request despite it being less extravagant.

“Damuel promised to protect those close to me to shield my heart,” I said. “Judithe, I must ask that you protect the temple and the lower city alongside him. The Gutenbergs are crucial to the continued expansion of the printing industry. Steel your resolve and protect both Ehrenfest and the temple. Do not let Lady Georgine inside no matter what.”

Judithe had good eyes and a talent for long-range attacks, so I wanted to station her at the temple with some weapons that didn’t use mana. Bug bombs would probably work wonders against a thoroughbred noble like Georgine.

“Yes, my lady. I shall protect the temple.”

I spent my time making as many arrangements as I could think of, and suddenly it was sixth bell. Eckhart and Justus arrived a short while later; I went to see them the moment I received the news.

“Eckhart! Justus!”

“M-Milady...?”

Justus froze upon seeing me, at a loss for words. Sylvester must not have explained my circumstances during their meeting. Eckhart, on the other hand, didn’t seem very surprised at all. He stared at me for a moment and murmured my name as if seeking confirmation, then immediately began asking about the current status of our situation.

Eckhart cares more about how we’re going to save Ferdinand and the progress we’ve made with our preparations than about my sudden growth spurt. That’s fair enough.

To be honest, having someone barely react at all to my appearance was more refreshing than anything else.

“Eckhart, every single one of the preparations you asked about has already been completed,” I said. “We have secured Dunkelfelger’s assistance and plan to leave to rescue Ferdinand tonight.”

“Excellent work,” Eckhart replied, his eyes filled with hope and genuine approval. “I’d expect no less from my little sister and Lord Ferdinand’s protégée.”

I was so overjoyed. Eckhart only ever praised me when I was doing a lot to help his lord, so my actions thus far must have been exceptionally useful.

“The aub said you are confident you can succeed,” he continued. “Is that true?”

“Yes. And with you two here, our chances have shot up even higher.”

Eckhart nodded upon hearing my answer. My biggest concern had been not knowing where to find the Mana Replenishment hall, but now I wouldn’t have any trouble reaching it.

“Eckhart,” Justus said, “how can you act so normally when she’s changed this much?”

“Does it matter how much she’s changed on the outside?” Eckhart replied without missing a beat. “She’s still my sister, and she still cares deeply about Lord Ferdinand.” He then headed over to Lasfam with a metal cage containing what appeared to be the layattendant’s name stone.

“It might not be a problem, but aren’t you curious?” Justus said. Unlike his fellow retainer, he was unable to ignore my unusual growth. He had even begun to tremble on the spot, torn between asking for more information and focusing on the situation at hand.

It didn’t take him long to decide which mattered more.

“What in the world happened to you, milady?” he asked, inching closer and closer, his brown eyes sparkling with curiosity. “You grew so suddenly—and into such a beautiful woman, might I add. This phenomenon is entirely new to me.”

I was about to respond when Hartmut got between us and said, “I’m glad you asked.” It was kind of scary seeing his orange eyes once again burn with excitement.

“Such a miracle could never have occurred to anyone but Lady Rozemyne, whom the gods love more than any other,” Hartmut

began. "It was through a miracle granted to her by Anwachs the God of Growth that she matured so! Allow me to explain its splendor and emotional significance!"

"Well, until Justus gets bored, at least."

Indeed, Hartmut's explanations contained so many religious metaphors and so much repetitive praise that even Justus would tire of them eventually. My own retainers disregarded them entirely at this point, since they had needed to listen to the same ramble time and time again.

And of course, Hartmut didn't appreciate that. He started using the purplest prose he could come up with just so he could say he wasn't repeating himself.

Their Information and Name Stones

“Let us share intelligence while eating dinner,” I said and started toward the dining hall. “There is not much time, Eckhart.”

“Right,” he agreed, and came along.

“What happened to Lady Letizia?” I’d seen Ferdinand entrust her with a message; then Detlinde had revealed that she had tricked the poor girl as part of a much larger plan. Letizia was doubtless being blamed for the entire incident and suffering immensely. I was terribly worried about her safety.

Eckhart had surely spoken with her, but he merely raised an eyebrow at me. “Who knows? I certainly don’t,” he replied, so blunt and disinterested that I wanted to cradle my head.

“Lady Letizia *did* give you a message from Ferdinand, didn’t she? Shouldn’t you have protected her or something?”

“What are you talking about? She has her own guard knights. Why should I need to look after her when Lord Ferdinand returned our name stones and is currently in life-threatening danger?”

“I mean, true, but...” I stared up at him, making my dissatisfaction clear.

Eckhart glared at me, then dangled a sound-blocker in front of my eyes. As I took it, I noticed the emotion fade from his expression. He looked unconcerned at first glance, but the flames of wrath burned in his green eyes, barely contained.

“Lord Ferdinand’s orders come first. Don’t think about the girl,” Eckhart said. “If I hadn’t drilled those words into my mind, I might have cut her down where she stood.”

“Excuse me?!” I gasped, shocked that he would say something so violent. He looked so nonchalant; I would never have guessed that he had come so close to killing Letizia.

“Think about it. They were the only two in the replenishment hall; then she came out with the message about his life being in danger. I don’t know what happened in there, exactly... but Lady Letizia is the only one who could have done it. At the very least, Lady Detlinde wasn’t in the hall when Lady Letizia gave us our

name stones.”

I could only blink at him. From what I’d seen, Letizia had rushed out of the hall, and then Detlinde had entered not long afterward. Ehrenfest’s Mana Replenishment hall was hidden behind a tapestry in the archduke’s office, where Sylvester could normally be found unless he was attending the Archduke Conference. I’d assumed that Detlinde had similarly been waiting nearby.

“Is Ahrensbach’s Mana Replenishment hall not behind its aub’s office?” I asked. “Lady Detlinde must have been right outside.”

“It is, but she has her own office elsewhere. She went out of her way to have a new one made close to her chambers, saying that scholars should come to her, not the other way around. Everyone let it happen because she wasn’t formally the aub—and it’s thanks to their acquiescence that she can behave so arrogantly.”

I’d once been taught that an aub’s chambers were kept far away from their office for a reason—so that untrustworthy nobles wouldn’t have cause to be anywhere near their living environment—but Detlinde must not have been bothered about that.

“Lord Ferdinand always took extreme care to ensure that no dangerous individuals entered the aub’s office while Lady Letizia was practicing Mana Replenishment. This afternoon was no exception; they went into the office together, and we guarded the door in the meantime.”

Even in Ehrenfest, only the archduke and archnoble retainers bound to him by blood could enter his office during Mana Replenishment. It would come across as extremely hostile for there to be guards both inside and outside the room. Moreover, during Ahrensbach’s Mana Replenishment, Eckhart and Justus had stood guard as individuals from another duchy.

“We were guarding the door when Lady Letizia rushed out, trembling and pale,” Eckhart explained. She had delivered the aforementioned message and then given Justus a small cage containing several name stones. Eckhart had immediately understood what it meant, for Ferdinand would only return the stones when he thought his life was in danger—to spare his namesworn from joining him and so they could pass on what they’d discovered to Ehrenfest.

“I went to seize her so that I could get the details, but her guard knights stopped me,” Eckhart said. “Then Justus grabbed me by the collar.”

The situation had shocked and thoroughly disturbed Eckhart, so it made sense that he'd wanted to seize the one person who could provide the answers he sought. At the same time, I could understand why Letizia's guard knights and Justus had immediately moved to stop him.

Eckhart sure does get scary whenever Ferdinand is involved...

"Under normal circumstances," he continued, "I would have fought Lady Letizia's guard knights, secured her, and then made her tell me what was going on. The only reason I didn't was because Justus yelled that obeying Lord Ferdinand came first. In other words, if you wish to complain that we don't have her or at least what she knew, direct it at him."

Just so you know, I wanted you to keep her safe, not imprison and interrogate her.

I wasn't going to chastise Justus for his decision. I would praise him, if anything. Letting a frantic Eckhart, unsure whether his lord was safe, lay his hands on Letizia would only have ended in disaster. He would have been caught and confined before he could obtain any information.

"In the first place, why are you defending Lady Letizia?" Eckhart asked, clearly frustrated. "It's taking all of my willpower not to get annoyed just thinking about her. I didn't say anything to the aub, since he told me you were fighting to rescue Lord Ferdinand, but you're mixing up the culprits. As much as Lady Detlinde's an empty-headed moron, we don't yet have the grounds to eliminate her."

I paused, choosing my next words carefully. I didn't want Eckhart to think that Letizia was even worse than Detlinde.

"First, I saw Lady Letizia accept the message and cage from Ferdinand and rush out of the replenishment hall. Then, barely a moment later, Lady Detlinde entered. She said she was enacting Lady Georgine's plans and that they had used Lady Letizia as a pawn."

Eckhart's eyes hardened. Sylvester must not have revealed everything I'd seen in the replenishment hall.

"Lady Letizia *did* use powdered poison on Ferdinand," I continued, "but he reacted immediately and drank some kind of potion to deal with it. He's only in danger now because Lady Detlinde entered afterward, threw some kind of paralytic powder at him, clapped schtappe-sealing bracelets on his wrists, and then put

his hand on the activated replenishment circle. The poison is a concern, but we should be more worried about his mana running out.”

Eckhart’s expression betrayed an intense hatred of everything. I could practically hear him grinding his teeth. My aim had been to exonerate Letizia, but it seemed that I’d only added another name to the list of culprits.

“Lady Letizia must not have learned a thing if she let such a stupid woman manipulate her into poisoning Lord Ferdinand,” Eckhart spat. “Despite your advice, we should never have let up on her education.” He took the sound-blocker from me, then gave me an imploring look and said, “Rozemyne... Can we really make it in time?”

“Is that not the reason you came back?”

Eckhart shook his head and solemnly replied, “No, we came back to give the information and evidence Lord Ferdinand gathered to the aub, and to follow our lord once it became clear that he had passed away.”

“We’ll reach him in time no matter what, so don’t even *think* about doing something so foolish! You and Ferdinand both give up way too easily!”

Justus arrived at the dinner table much sooner than expected; it hadn’t taken him long to realize that Hartmut’s speeches were all show and no substance. “Is it true that Lord Ferdinand is at greater risk of running out of mana than succumbing to the poison, milady?” he asked.

“The poison *does* pose a threat,” I replied, “but it wasn’t instantly fatal, much to Lady Detlinde’s surprise. Ferdinand drank something when he was first struck with the powder that I suspect was an antidote of some kind. Assuming it worked, mana loss is indeed our biggest concern.”

Justus chewed on my response. “Instantly fatal, did you say? Do you know the symptoms?”

“Lady Detlinde said the powder should have immediately turned him into a feystone. Since it failed, she used some other powder to stun him and then elected to drain his mana instead.”

There was a short pause before Justus said, “Allow me to borrow your workshop once we have eaten. I shall make an antidote.” He then returned to his food, eating considerably faster

while still moving with the grace expected of a noble.

“But of course,” I replied. “Before you start to brew, however, do see whether any of the antidotes Hartmut and the others are making are what you are looking for. They have prepared many kinds.”

“Your thoroughness astounds me,” Justus remarked, so taken aback that he set down his cutlery. “You were made aware of the situation just earlier today, were you not...?”

“Earlier this afternoon, yes, but Ehrenfest has been preparing for a defensive war for about a month now. The most I’ve done today is get permission to rescue him, convince Dunkelfelger to assist us, and ask my retainers to prepare to leave.”

“We came to Ehrenfest to make one last delivery for our lord, expecting to follow him in death soon after. But when we arrived, we were told to reunite with you—that you were preparing to launch a rescue operation *tonight*. It was a shock, but one for which I am grateful.” Justus then slumped back in his chair and sighed. “From the bottom of my heart, I am glad you are here, milady. We knew about your disappearance.”

“I thought the other duchies were being told that I was sick...”

“We learned the truth from Professor Hirschur. She told us as a reward of sorts, since Lord Ferdinand helped her brew from the day after the graduation ceremony until the day he returned to Ahrensbach.”

Professor Hirschur?! Come on!

Naturally, she wouldn’t have told just anyone, and even I thought it was okay for Ferdinand and the others to know. The weird part was that she’d practically *traded them* the information. I couldn’t help but wonder what she would have done if any of the Ahrensbach retainers had been there with them.

“As we brewed and educated Raimund, we received word that ships had arrived from Lanzenave,” Justus continued. “Lord Ferdinand said to turn them away—in the past, they were only allowed entry *after* the Archduke Conference—but Lady Detlinde refused to listen. She stole away back to Ahrensbach to open the gate for Lanzenave, forcing us to follow.”

Umm, what? Is that allowed...?

I couldn’t believe how easily Detlinde had cast aside tradition. But at the same time, there was something far more important on my mind.

“One moment,” I said. “Is that gate open as we speak?”

“Naturally. Lanzenave ships are going in and out of Ahrensbach as though they own the place. Lord Ferdinand advised Lady Detlinde to close the gate on many an occasion, but she just wouldn’t listen. And because *she* dyed the foundation, the decision was entirely in her hands.”

The fact of the matter was that *Detlinde’s elder sister* had dyed Ahrensbach’s foundational magic, but that didn’t matter right now. I’d assumed the border gate in question would be closed, so I’d planned to ask Aub Dunkelfelger to place teleporters between his country gate and the border gate he shared with Ahrensbach. But if Ahrensbach’s border gate was *open*, we could save ourselves a lot of time.

“Justus,” I said, “which is closer to Ahrensbach’s castle: its country gate or the border gate it shares with Dunkelfelger?”

“Its country gate. Why?”

“How convenient,” I replied with a grin. “We should arrive sooner than expected, then.”

Justus leaned closer, his eyes brimming with curiosity. “What makes you think that?”

“How much do you know about Lady Georgine’s movements? According to Lady Detlinde, she was ready to depart as soon as she received an ordonnanz confirming her plan’s completion. How far is Ehrenfest from Ahrensbach’s castle?”

“About seven days by carriage or two by highbeast... But she might have gone to our border ahead of time. Luggage-filled carriages departed from her villa maybe ten days ago, ostensibly because she was participating in Spring Prayer.”

“Send an ordonnanz to Sylvester,” I said, standing up at once. But before I could go anywhere, Justus raised a hand to stop me.

“The aub already knows. He asked us the same questions at the Royal Academy.”

“Oh, good. How did you two make it there, anyway? I thought one could only access a duchy’s teleportation hall with permission from its aub. Is that not the case in Ahrensbach?” It was hard to imagine Georgine or Detlinde letting them go and potentially compromising their scheme.

Justus gave a half smile. “It was part of the contract Lord Ferdinand signed in return for supplying mana to Ahrensbach’s foundation before his Starbinding. Raimund was permitted to stay

in the Royal Academy outside of winter, and we were permitted to check on him.”

Ahrensbach had been quite receptive to those terms, no doubt because Raimund’s research had received accolades during two consecutive awards ceremonies. Little did they know, the true reasons for the contract had been to protect Raimund from the faction war raging in the castle and to provide an escape route in case of an emergency.

“Those who leave a duchy are seldom accepted back into it, even when their lives are at risk,” Justus informed me. “Thus, Lord Ferdinand recorded evidence of Ahrensbach’s collusion with Lanzenave and various dangerous remarks they have made so that we could purchase our protection, as it were.”

Ferdinand gave his retainers their feystones back and did everything in his power to ensure their safety, but what did he do for himself?! Why didn’t he think about his own well-being?!

Seeing my frustration—it annoyed me that Ferdinand always put his own safety last—Justus gave me a teasing look. “He also said something most troubling...” he continued, not looking troubled at all.

“What...?”

“We aren’t the only ones he gave instructions to. He has a message for you as well, milady.”

My stomach dropped, but I grimaced and urged Justus to continue. I didn’t have much of a choice.

“In his words, ‘I entrust Eckhart, Justus, and Lasfam to you. Stay in Ehrenfest and do nothing at all. Upon my death, everything I own will become yours. And as promised, both Ehrenfest and Yurgenschmidt will be saved.’ In truth, we don’t have a clue what he meant. Do you, milady?”

Everything he owns... will become mine?

I’d already connected the dots. I didn’t know how, but Ferdinand must have realized that we each owned part of the Book of Mestionora and that his death would make my book complete.

“Stay in Ehrenfest and do nothing at all,” huh? In other words, “Don’t you dare try to rescue me.” Hmm...

An indescribable anger surged through me. I’d made it perfectly clear to Ferdinand that I wouldn’t stop caring about him. I’d declared that I would go to any lengths to save him—that I would make enemies of Ahrensbach, the Sovereignty, and even the Zent.

"I understand what Ferdinand means, but I must refuse," I said. "I'm not going to wait here and do nothing while he's dying. I *will* rescue him, no matter how angry it makes him. I'd do anything to save his life."

"That's my little sister," Eckhart said with an overjoyed smile.

Justus gave a similar grin and took out a sound-blocker. I accepted it, wondering what he wanted to say—and the moment I did, he adopted a truly meaningful expression.

"As you know, taking someone's name grants you the power to kill them... but it also lets you keep them alive. Name-sworn die alongside their charge, but they can also survive otherwise fatal scenarios through the mana they receive from their lord or lady. It goes both ways."

The blood drained from my face as my anger was replaced with utter confusion. It was clear as day what Justus wanted me to do, but for him to have even suggested it, he must have known about Quinta's name stone.

"Justus, how do you...?"

"I made the bag it was hidden in."

"I see. Wait, hold on... In other words—to summarize—you really want me to..."

He wanted me to steal the name stone so that I could supply his lord with mana. I firmly shook my head. No way would Ferdinand ever forgive me, and in the first place, I didn't want to take someone's name without permission. But my refusal only made Justus smile even more intensely.

"Did you not just tell me you would do *anything* to save him, milady?"

"I did, but..."

"You even told the aub and everyone else that you would take on the world to ensure his safety. Was that an empty declaration?"

"N-No, it wasn't. It wasn't, but—"

"Accepting his name shouldn't require anywhere near as much resolve."

Surely this was false equivalence. My resolve to take on the world couldn't be compared to my readiness to accept someone's name. Ferdinand certainly hadn't intended to give his to me, and the thought of taking his life in my hands had never even crossed my mind.

"Right now," Justus continued, "our greatest concern is that he

might run out of mana. Accepting his name should grant us more time. Being enveloped in the mana of another should also ease the pain Lord Ferdinand must be going through.”

At once, I remembered all the gross speeches Hartmut had made about “the bliss” of being enveloped in my mana. My spirit began to waver; I couldn’t deny that Justus was making sense.

“But... couldn’t anyone else do it?” I asked.

“Lord Ferdinand chose *you* to look after his name,” Justus replied, looking as serious as I’d ever seen him. “Would you feel right giving it to someone else?”

I shook my head.

He continued, “Given the urgency of our situation, you must not err on the side of caution. Upon rescuing him, simply explain the circumstances and return his name. You would struggle to relax with his name forever in your care, would you not?” He repeated again and again that I would only need to keep the name until we knew for sure that Ferdinand was safe.

“The stone... didn’t come with a box,” I said, staring hard at Justus. “Teach me how to make one.”

Once we’d all eaten, I made a name-stone-enveloping box in the workshop and then went into my hidden room. I retrieved the crumpled paper ball from the bottom of the bag that Justus had apparently made, then carefully unwrapped it to reveal the name stone with “Quinta” carved within it. I could tell from its multicolor appearance that it contained every element.

I put the name stone into my newly made white box and then added mana to make the box turn into a neat cocoon, much like I’d done with my name-sworn retainers. I made sure to pour all of my mana in at once so it wouldn’t hurt, and the box changed shape immediately.

Holding the small white cocoon in my hand and continuing to pour mana into it, I gave my first order: “Don’t give up, Ferdinand. I’m coming to save you, and there’s nothing that can stop me. *Live.*”

Teleporting

“Do wake up, Lady Rozemyne.”

I was roused from my sleep by Lieseleta; I had decided to take a nap after stealing Ferdinand’s name and was now feeling quite refreshed. I got her and Gretia to help me change into my riding clothes, made sure to put my newly acquired name stone in one of my pouches, and then exited my room. Downstairs, my knights were all gathered and wearing feystone armor.

“Lieseleta, Gretia, Lasfam—please look after my library while I am gone,” I said. “The defensive magic tools I am leaving behind can be used by—”

“Worry not, Lady Rozemyne—we know exactly what to do,” Lieseleta interrupted me with a smile. “Think only of saving Lord Ferdinand. The aub is waiting.”

I nodded and then sent an ordonnanz: “This is Rozemyne. I am leaving now. Is everything ready?”

“Sure is,” Sylvester’s bird replied. “We’re set up in the first training area. Hurry over.”

Leonore and Cornelius took the lead as we flew to our designated meeting spot by the castle. I didn’t know which of the grounds was the first one, so I was glad not to be at the front.

Lessy was packed with magic tools and rejuvenation potions, so Hartmut and Justus were riding with me to manage them. I could still remember verbatim their conversation before our departure.

“I don’t believe we need you to ride with us, Justus...” Hartmut had said.

“Oh, then I will need to teach you which potions to give Lord Ferdinand and how to administer them,” Justus had retorted. “If anyone should stay behind, it should be you.”

Of course, Hartmut had outright refused to leave my side, so they had both ended up riding with me. Hartmut was immensely excited to see what miracles I might create during our rescue operation, while Justus was patting Lessy all over, remarking again and again that my highbeast was as fascinating as always.

Are these two going to stick together throughout the entire operation...? I wondered, unable to suppress a sigh. Neither one of them seemed at all tense.

The Noble's Quarter was quiet, as one would expect in the dead of night, but not the castle; its bright windows cut through the darkness, indicating the people busily moving around inside. Even more light was coming from the grounds below where the Knight's Order carried out their training.

"It's Lady Rozemyne!"

"Make space, knights! Highbeasts coming down!"

Despite the late hour, the crowd gathered in the first training area was even larger than usual; more guards had been added to tonight's night watch so that they could be summoned to battle at a moment's notice. The atmosphere was so tense and everyone's expressions so dour that I could immediately tell they were preparing for Georgine.

The mood inside my highbeast was the complete opposite.

"Come here," Sylvester said. He was waiting with his retainers atop a massive teleporter used to transport people—a teleporter that only archdukes could place. It would take us straight to Kirnberger, where our duchy's country gate was located.

"I thank you ever so much for your support," I replied.

"Don't sweat it. This is a trial run to see if we can move a lot of manpower before Ahrensbach's invasion begins. If everything works, it should give us a huge advantage."

As we continued our conversation, the others dispelled their highbeasts and stepped onto the teleporter with us. Karstedt took the opportunity to pat Eckhart and Cornelius on the shoulder.

"Eckhart, Cornelius," he said, "protect Lord Ferdinand and Lady Rozemyne. Bring them home safe."

"You may count on us," they replied together.

Once everyone was on the teleporter, Sylvester raised a hand, signaling the guards lined up behind him to kneel and touch the circle. As their mana flowed into it, black and golden lights started to swirl through the air. Our dark-yellow capes caught the wind as Sylvester held his schtappe aloft and chanted.

"Nenluessel. Kirnberger!"

My vision warped and twisted, and a floating sensation overcame me, like whenever I teleported to or from the Royal Academy. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to ride out the queasiness

I was feeling... and then heard a voice say, "Welcome, Aub Ehrenfest." I slowly opened my eyes again to see Giebe Kirnberger and several knights.

We're actually here...

We were inside Kirnberger's summer estate. The first archduke had placed teleporters here and inside the other giebess' estates so that the Knight's Order could mobilize from the Noble's Quarter in the event of a disturbance. But because no such disturbances had occurred, the archducal family had ended up forgetting about them. I'd rediscovered their existence through the Book of Mestionora, and Sylvester had agreed to revive them.

"Hm. Pretty convenient," he said, looking at the circle beneath our feet. "We could use this if something happens in the south of the duchy."

One of the knights who had been channeling mana into the teleporter wore a slightly troubled frown. "The circle is convenient, but if we are to use it before charging into battle, we will need to prepare rejuvenation potions for those of us tasked with supplying it and set aside some time for our mana to recover. I would struggle to fight in my current state."

"Could we get scholars or attendants to activate the circle for us?" asked another.

Sylvester shook his head. "That would mean bringing them into battle. It simply isn't worth the risk."

"In an ideal world, those channeling mana into the circle wouldn't have to come with us," Karstedt added. "They need to touch the circle to activate it, though, so trying to leave them behind would probably result in them losing their hands. Not something we can test either."

This quickly snowballed into a discussion about the functions of the teleporter. We really didn't have time to get lost in speculation, so I cleared my throat and said, "Should we not open the border gate?"

"Ah, right," Sylvester replied. "Come on, then. This investigation can wait."

The border gate towered above us, gleaming in the moonlight. I suppressed the urge to rush forward on my own and instead waited patiently as everyone formed their highbeasts. Sylvester led with his retainers, while I followed along with mine.

Once we had arrived at the border gate, Sylvester tapped it

with his schtappe and chanted, “*Oeffnetor*.” The ivory doors slowly began to open, revealing the country gate behind them. Its slightly iridescent glow, reminiscent of the finest pearls, was probably the result of mana, not the moonlight.

“Rozemyne...” Sylvester muttered, staring up at the gate. “Can you seriously activate this thing?”

“Wait and see,” I replied. The second son of the previous Zent had left to open and close country gates with only a Grutrissheit, and Tollkuehnheit had managed to open one when fleeing to found Lanzenave. In other words, dyeing the country’s foundation wasn’t necessary to use its gates; the only requirement was a Grutrissheit.

That said, because my Book of Mestionora is incomplete, it only lets me use teleportation circles that already exist. I can’t open or close the gates themselves.

That was good enough, though. I climbed out of my highbeast, approached the country gate, and produced my schtappe.

“*Grutrissheit*.”

At once, the Book of Mestionora appeared in my hands. Ignoring the gasps behind me, I pressed it against the gate.

Eep!

My mana was sucked out much faster than I’d anticipated, maybe because the gate had gone without any for such a long time. It was uncomfortable, to say the least, but I didn’t pull the book away. The gate went from being only faintly iridescent to a vibrant rainbow, a quiet rumbling noise came from within, and its triangular roof started to open.

“Oho... How splendid...” Hartmut crooned.

“I can think of nothing more magnificent,” Clarissa agreed, sounding equally as euphoric.

“By the God of Darkness’s grace, her hair is the color of the night sky. By the Goddess of Light’s kindness, her eyes are a radiant gold. Not to mention her beauty, which could only have come from countless divine blessings. Seeing her wield the Grutrissheit and make the omni-elemental gate shine again, I can say only this: she is the very picture of Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom!”

Please shut up. You’re creeping out everyone from Kirnberger!

Or so I’d assumed. In truth, they didn’t seem creeped out at all. Cries of awe from Sylvester and the Kirnberger knights mixed in with Hartmut and Clarissa’s enthused ranting.

“The gate’s shining...” Sylvester whispered. “Is this real...?”

“Then is that... the Grutrissheit?!” Giebe Kirnberger exclaimed.

“Is Lady Rozemyne...?” one of his knights began.

Kirnberger’s country gate hadn’t been active for roughly two hundred years, so everyone was surprised to see it shining brighter. That didn’t concern me, though; my eyes were locked on the opening roof. Inside was the teleportation circle that would allow us to move between the different country gates.

“There is a spiral staircase in the gatepost,” I said. “For lack of time, however, I will simply fly up to the roof. The gate won’t allow anyone else to approach, so those of you who are coming with me to Ahrensbach will need to ride in my highbeast.”

As instructed, my retainers started climbing into Lessy.

“Well, I’m going,” I told Sylvester. “I *will* return with Ferdinand.”

“Hold it, Rozemyne. Take this—I got it from Prince Sigiswald.”

Sylvester held out a charm-looking necklace decorated with a six-element feystone and the royal family’s crest. I noticed there was also a protective magic circle carved into it, but it didn’t seem particularly strong.

“This is from Prince Sigiswald...?” I repeated. “When did you meet with him?”

“After my conversation with Eckhart and Justus.”

According to Sylvester, the Zent had requested a meeting immediately upon learning of the emergency. Anastasius had urged him time and time again to gather as much information as he could about events that involved me, since they wouldn’t be able to predict what might happen otherwise.

“At first, the Zent tried to arrange a meeting three days from now,” Sylvester explained. “I agreed, though I made sure to warn him that the emergency would probably be over and done with by then and that he would only receive a report of the fallout. He sent Prince Sigiswald straight to Ehrenfest’s tea party room.”

The Zent hadn’t been able to visit in person, both because he was immensely busy and because Raublut, the knight commander, happened to be off duty. Sylvester had thus spoken with Sigiswald, whereupon he had received the charm he was giving to me now.

“He said to wear it no matter what to prove you’re acting with the royal family’s permission. Turn around; I’ll put it on you.”

Having the royal family’s permission would save us a lot of trouble when it came to stealing Ahrensbach’s foundation. If

nothing else, it would silence any disgruntled nobles we might encounter along the way. My only focus was saving Ferdinand; I wasn't at all interested in fighting Ahrensbach's nobles as long as they didn't try to stop me.

Having this crest should keep everyone out of my way.

Ahrensbach had plotted the downfall of the girl who, by royal decree, was both their future archduchess and the third prince's fiancée. Even worse, they had disregarded the Zent's wishes a second time by attempting to kill the man he had sent to join their archducal family. I didn't think this pendant from Sigiswald would make *every* noble back down, but it would surely work on Letizia's allies and those of the neutral faction.

I turned my back to Sylvester and scooped my hair out of the way to make things easier for him. At once, I was reminded of my days as an apprentice blue shrine maiden—specifically when he'd given me that necklace with a pitch-black feystone. It had seemed unusual to me then, but now my attendants adorned me with accessories every single day. Sylvester definitely wouldn't say, "Have you never been given jewelry by a man before?" this time.

Because, I mean, I've received so many accessories since then. I sure have grown.

"This is just like when you gifted me that black pendant," I said. "Do you think this charm from Prince Sigiswald will protect me too...?"

Sylvester nodded. "It should protect you and anyone else you want to keep safe. Now... Get it done." There was the clink of clasp metal, and then he gently urged me onward.

I nodded, climbed into my highbeast with the others, flew up to the top of the gate, and then descended into the room now revealed. The floor was glossy and iridescent, and atop it was a large teleportation circle. It had once been true that the Zent would come here each year with their retainers in tow. The Book of Mestionora's sections about the older generations said they had originally taken enormous groups with them when circling all the glorious, wealthy cities with country gates. But as time had passed, their retinues had grown smaller and smaller, perhaps indicating their increasing focus on preserving mana.

I exited my Pandabus and stood atop the teleportation circle. Sylvester, Karstedt, and the others were on their highbeasts, waiting atop Kirnberger's border gate and in the sky. I smiled and waved at

them, then formed my schtappe.

“Grutrisshheit.”

Because my Book of Mestionora had a shining surface, it was easy to read even while it was dark out. It really was convenient. I moved my finger to search for how to move the teleporter, then selected what appeared on my screen.

“Kehrschluessel. Dunkelfelger,” I said.

The magic circle popped out of the screen, floated above the teleportation circle, and then began to rotate while emitting an omni-elemental glow. As if spurred on by that light, the teleporter activated. The feeling of my mana being sucked out from above and below came as a surprise.

My vision went white as the light continued to flow. Then the floating sensation from before returned, so I closed my eyes. The last thing I heard was a shout from Sylvester:

“Take care of Ferdinand for me, Rozemyne!”

To Battle

“HRAAAHHH!”

As I endured the swaying sensation of the teleporter, I started to hear low, booming roars from some distance away—the exhilarated war cries of people ready to play ditto. I’d definitely arrived in Dunkelfelger. At the same time, the ambient temperature seemed to get maybe five degrees higher. It sure was hot here.

When I opened my eyes, I was inside Dunkelfelger’s country gate. The teleporter was shining, as was the gate itself. The roof was still shut, though, so I couldn’t see the knights anywhere.

“Yet I can still hear their voices,” I mused. “I hope they don’t exhaust themselves before we even reach Ahrensbach...”

“You may rest assured, Lady Rozemyne—none of our knights are that weak,” Clarissa said, sticking out her chest and donning a proud smile. But her declaration just gave me a new reason to worry: how was I going to lead the knights when they were this pumped up? “Not to mention, the country gate is being activated for the first time since the Zent stopped visiting over a decade ago. It’s only natural that everyone is excited.”

Oh, right... It’s been about a decade.

Clarissa’s response was strangely convincing. Those back in Kirnberger had only known about the phenomenon through historical records, whereas the Dunkelfelgerians had seen it with their own eyes. Of course they weren’t stunned speechless.

I climbed out of my Pandabus, pressed the Book of Mestionora against the wall, and then started channeling mana into it. The roaring outside grew louder as the roof parted ever so slowly. Once it was fully open, I got back into my highbeast and took to the sky.

There were even more knights gathered than I’d expected. One hundred stood atop the right gatepost, fully armored and divided into ten equal rows, behind two figures whom I took to be their commanders. I could also see Lestilaut, the archducal couple, and their retainers. The left gatepost was several times as populated with plainclothes spectators—here to see the knights off, I assumed.

It was very overcrowded.

I went to the roof of the right gatepost.

Hm? I don't see Lady Hannelore. Maybe because she's underage...

It was late enough that I wasn't too surprised, but it was still a shame that she wasn't present. We hadn't interacted much at the Royal Academy this year, so I'd wanted to at least greet her.

"Aub Dunkelfelger, everyone who volunteered to participate," I said, addressing those gathered, "I thank you all from the bottom of my heart for your speedy response and support."

Everyone except the aub gasped and stared. Lestilaut in particular looked stunned; his eyes were practically boring into me. There was a drawn-out silence... and then, to my surprise, Hannelore's voice came from behind me.

"The aub informed us of your growth, but... is it really you, Lady Rozemyne?"

"Indeed, it is," I replied instinctively. But when I turned around to look at her—

Wait, what? Hold on.

I'd accepted that only the knights were going to join us, but that quickly changed when I saw Hannelore and what she was wearing. Now it was my turn to gasp.

"Lady Hannelore, don't tell me..."

She was fully clad in feystone plate armor, evidence enough that she was going to join our attack force.

"I disgraced myself during our third-year ditter game," Hannelore began with a timid smile. "And in Dunkelfelger, the shame of one match can only be cleared through victory in another. That is why I must ask you to include me. I shall do everything in my power to support you." Her calm, gentle demeanor *really* clashed with what she was saying.

Come again?! "The shame of one match can only be cleared through victory in another"?!

Was it seriously acceptable for an underage female archduke candidate to accompany me to Ahrensbach? We weren't going there to sightsee; this was war. I turned my attention to the archducal couple, my lips twitching. They seemed to view Hannelore's participation as a foregone conclusion, and they certainly weren't going to stop her this late into the game. As Hannelore had once said, our two duchies had very different customs.

Still, this culture shock is way too extreme!

But then it hit me: how could I say it was weird that Hannelore was being sent into battle? I was an underage female archduke candidate too!

Nooo! Am I the ridiculous one here?!

“Lady Rozemyne, may I have a moment?” Leonore asked, prompting me to straighten my back. “I wish to brief the knights while you exchange greetings with the aub. There will not be time when we arrive at Ahrensbach’s country gate.”

Judging by Dunkelfelger’s earlier clamor, I could guess that Ahrensbach’s gate would start shining when we teleported there; the knights stationed nearby would immediately notice our arrival. We wouldn’t have the time to leisurely discuss plans then, as even the slightest delay would give our foes time to gather their forces. And since my aim was to fly straight to the temple with as few battles as possible, now really was the best opportunity to share and discuss intelligence.

“Please do,” I said.

“Angelica and the scholars can guard you in the meantime. Everyone, let us go.”

Carrying the map I’d given her, Leonore went over to Dunkelfelger’s knights. Under normal circumstances, it would be unthinkable to entrust one’s safety to scholars, but the scholars here were all talented warriors. We had Justus, Taught by Ferdinand; Clarissa, Scholar of the Sword; and Hartmut of the Flapping Tongue. Leonore had been wise to put me in their care.

I’m guessing Heisshitze is commanding Dunkelfelger’s troops.

He had arrived with Hannelore and was now squinting down at Leonore’s map, muttering his disbelief about its detail. I recognized the cape he was wearing.

“Please excuse me, Lady Rozemyne,” Hannelore said with a smile. “As a commanding officer, I would do well to participate in the briefing.” Then she moved to join the others.

I turned to Lestilaut and the archducal couple, thanked them for granting us the aid of a greater duchy, and then informed them that Ehrenfest had contacted the royal family. “This pendant bearing the royal family’s crest should clear away any doubts. Prince Sigiswald gave it to me as proof that I act with their permission.” I pulled it out from under my clothes, and everyone widened their eyes.

“I must admit,” Sieglinde began, “when the aub first informed me of the situation, I doubted the authenticity of your claims. But

there can be no mistaking a crest of such high quality.” She looked at her husband with a sigh, then smiled at me and said, “Our duchy shall obey the will of the Zent.”

“I thank you ever so much, Lady Sieglinde.”

“And to answer Ehrenfest’s call, we shall participate in true—”

An intense smile from Sieglinde, his first wife, stopped the overeager aub in his tracks. His inertia wilted, rendering him speechless.

“During this expedition,” Sieglinde continued, “the aub will remain here in Dunkelfelger, ready to move troops to the Sovereignty at the Zent’s order. For obvious reasons, business with the royal family and the Sovereign Knight’s Order cannot be entrusted to Lestilaut so soon after his coming of age.” Her dry smile made it clear that she had needed to thoroughly scold the aub, who had no doubt been determined to participate in “true ditter.”

“It surprises me more that Lady Hannelore is coming to Ahrensbach in his stead,” I replied.

Lestilaut glanced at his father. “If our archduke must travel to the Sovereignty, then we will need someone to guard our foundation. And as you know, Lady Rozemyne, I am this duchy’s next aub. The duty is mine and mine alone, which is why I cannot go with you.”

“Your motivation is most admirable, Lord Lestilaut, but must you speak so politely? I find it somewhat off-putting...”

In the past, he had always bad-mouthed me to my face and acted with great arrogance; did my sudden growth spurt really warrant this abrupt change of attitude? Even when considering the fact this was a public space, he was being way too sycophantic. Anytime our eyes met, he averted his gaze almost straight away.

“My sincerest apologies, but the owner of the Grutrissheit must be treated with the utmost respect. My old way of speaking would cause great offense.”

Oh... It’s not because I’ve matured, then.

The Grutrissheit was the mark of a true sovereign—a mark that neither the Zent nor any of the other royals currently had—so I could see why Lestilaut was being so polite. His duchy as a whole really seemed to value it. Reading their massive history book had made that clear to me.

“Still...” I said, “I would rather you speak more naturally. It

saddens me that you are acting so distant.”

“Hmph. Fine. If you insist.”

And with that, he had returned to normal. It was quite a relief, to be honest.

Lestilaut glanced at me, then asked in a low voice, “You *do* expect to win this, don’t you? I’m not asking out of concern for you; this is the perfect opportunity for Hannelore to right her wrongs. I realize you’re leading this mission, and it seems unlikely that she would surrender a second time, but... erm...”

Here in Dunkelfelger, throwing a game of ditter was extremely shameful. Our foray against Ahrensbach was Hannelore’s best chance at redemption after our match last year, when she had taken Wilfried’s hand and willingly left her duchy’s base. Lestilaut’s red eyes betrayed worry for his younger sister.

“We shouldn’t have any trouble stealing Ahrensbach’s foundation,” I said. “The true challenge is going to be rescuing Ferdinand.”

“But rescue him we shall,” Heissshitze interjected, tapping his chest as he approached. The knights’ meeting must have concluded. “I will put my absolute all into this mission. A grave error marred my last attempt to save Lord Ferdinand—but this time, I act with your guidance. I swear to be of use and to avoid erring again.”

Regret was heavy on Heissshitze’s face. He had played a hand in sending Ferdinand to Ahrensbach, and that knowledge clearly weighed on him. His attempt to do something nice had completely backfired; it was no wonder that he felt so terrible.

Heissshitze continued, squeezing his cape and staring up at the night sky with an expression of true resolve: “We shall rescue Lord Ferdinand; then I shall give him this cape of mine. It is something I should regain only through beating him in a true battle.” I could tell this was immensely important to him, but when I thought about how Ferdinand would react, something told me things were going to be awkward.

Ferdinand doesn’t want it back. He’s going to be furious.

A smirk crept onto my face; I could picture Heissshitze shoving the cape at Ferdinand and challenging him to ditter the moment he was safe. Ferdinand would definitely be annoyed, but I’d much rather than the empty look of resignation that was still stuck in my mind.

You can suck it up and accept his challenge, Ferdinand. And don’t

wrap me up in it this time!

“Your resolve gladdens my heart,” I said. “Let us save him without fail.”

“Indeed, we shall act faster than Steifebrise!” he replied, his voice sharp and crisp. Then he turned to Hannelore. “The ritual, Lady Hannelore!”

“Yes, sir!” she replied. “Lady Rozemyne, do stand in the center.”

“Um, hold on!” I cried. “I’m not whirling for you!”

I didn’t want to dance, but Hannelore just smiled while moving to her own position. “You do not need to whirl,” she said. “You need only do what you did the first time. There is no one better suited to raise morale than you, Lady Rozemyne.”

“HRAAAH!” one of the knights cheered. “Lady Hannelore is right!”

“We’ll receive a blessing from Lady Rozemyne herself!”

“From the Saint of Ehrenfest, who revived the true nature of our duchy’s rituals!”

I wanted to tell them to forget about the ceremony, but performing it before a ditter game was a tradition here, and the blessings would aid us in the coming battle. Plus, I was the one instigating this match, and it had been my decision to use the country gate that had gotten everyone so riled in the first place. I couldn’t waste time being reluctant, nor would it make sense to hurt morale.

There’s no escaping this—I already know that—but isn’t the flow of things a little strange?

Hannelore told me to stand at the very center of the border gate’s roof, so that was what I did. I couldn’t just ignore all the hopeful stares or the cheers I was getting from the audience.

Eep... I need to be careful not to overbless them.

I took a deep breath, watching the knights surround my retainers, then thrust my schtappe up into the air. “Grant power to those of us going into battle! *Lanze!*”

That cued the knights to transform their own schtappes. Unless my eyes deceived me, I wasn’t the only one wielding Leidenschaft’s spear; some of the knights had managed to make it as well.

“We are those who offer prayers and gratitude to the gods who have created the world,” I chanted.

Everyone slammed the butts of their spears against the ground.

The crowd roared in approval, shaking the very air around us. My heartbeat quickened, and my adrenaline started running high.

I continued, "Grant us power so that we might obtain victory. Grant us Angriff's mighty power, which is second to none. Grant us speed so that we might obtain victory. Grant us Steifebrise's speed, which is second to none."

But while I spoke the prayer normally, the surrounding knights practically sang it, twirling their spears faster at the same time. They had a nice spin going before they suddenly slammed the butts of their spears against the ground again and again, filling the air with the resounding clatter of metal. The spectators roared with each clash, and the temperature seemed to rise even higher. My body was practically on fire. It felt like we had all merged into one, and with that, I raised my spear.

"TO WAR!"

Even the audience shouted with me. I thrust my spear into the air, causing blessings to pour down as though I'd torn the night sky in two. Battle cries echoed—and that was when Aub Dunkelfelger stepped forward, raising a clenched fist.

"Go forth, my elite! Fight, and steal Ahrensbach's foundation! Move faster than Steifebrise!"

"Hoorah!" the knights chorused. "Faster than Steifebrise!"



Using my Pandabus, I took Hannelore, her guards, and my retainers to the country gate. The remaining knights ran up the stairs, which was fine with me; Dunkelfelger's knights had stamina to spare.

"Lady Rozemyne," Leonore said, "while we wait for everyone to gather, please drink this rejuvenation potion, make your highbeast as small as possible, and move off of the teleportation circle. In the meantime, we shall distribute the magic tools meant to cause confusion."

Matthias pointed to the teleportation circle. "The circle is not large enough for a hundred armored knights to use at once. I expect this will place a great burden on your mana, but you will need to divide everyone into two groups." Having a larger army would make our confusion tactic all the more effective, so he believed it was better to expend more mana than reduce our number. "Those in the first group will go outside via the stairs. They will wait there after teleporting. For the second group, we should pack as many knights into your highbeast as we can."

The knights in the second group would stay in my Pandabus until we were above Ahrensbach's country gate; then they would all pile out and mount their own highbeasts. We wanted to distract the gate guards for long enough to ensure the safety of the knights from the first group, who would exit via the stairs.

"In truth, I doubt we'll encounter any resistance at all," Eckhart said. "Ahrensbach's knight commander was relieved of duty when he tried to do as Lord Ferdinand instructed and station knights at the border gate."

Still, I doubted that Ahrensbach's gates were completely unprotected, especially now that Lanzenave's ships were freely using them and the whole Ferdinand incident had occurred. Letizia's retainers were bound to be in conflict with Detlinde, and there would probably be knights flying all over the place under various orders.

"Given everything that has happened, it would not be strange if Ahrensbach's knights were moved to positions other than those you and Justus remember," I noted. "Not to mention, with this many of us passing through the border without permission, the aub will inevitably notice. Negligence is always one's greatest enemy. For

that reason, I shall do as Leonore and Matthias advise.”

“Certainly, milady. It is good to be cautious,” Justus replied.

“And on that note, we should remember that Ahrensbach’s country gate sits in the ocean. Those leaving via the stairs will plunge straight into the water if they aren’t careful.”

Yeah, we really don’t want that to happen...

As we continued to discuss the matter, the knights who had taken the stairs began arriving and moving on to the magic circle. Once it was full, I explained our plan and performed the first teleportation. Then I urged the remaining knights into Lessy and teleported with them. The mana requirement for the second teleportation was much lower than for the first, maybe because the circle had already been filled.

In contrast to when we’d traveled from Kirnberger to Dunkelfelger, there were no enthusiastic cries upon our arrival in Ahrensbach. The chilling silence made it feel even more like there were enemies in wait.

“We have descended the stairs,” came the brief, quiet report of the knights who had teleported ahead of us. “Preparations complete.”

I gave everyone a few final warnings, feeling an unmistakable tightness in my chest, then opened the roof above us and drove up into the sky. As we passed over the border gate, the knights riding with me jumped out and mounted their own highbeasts. Likewise, the knights who had taken the stairs flew up to join us. They all cautiously scanned their surroundings, weapons in hand.

“There’s... nobody here,” I muttered. “Surely the aub noticed such a large group cross the border gate.”

The shining rainbow country gate must have stood out like a sore thumb amid the dark waters of the ocean. The border gate too, since it was reflecting the moonlight. We had all come to Ahrensbach feeling so tense, but the lack of even the slightest reaction to our arrival was actually kind of saddening. Not even the Ahrensbach Knight’s Order had come to investigate. We just flew through the air, completely unopposed, listening to the crashing of the waves below.

“Are they moving under cover of darkness to launch a surprise attack?” I asked.

“This certainly feels like a cause for concern...” Hannelore said.

“I told you there wouldn’t be anyone here,” Eckhart added. “We

didn't come to fight, so this is perfect for us. Let's head straight to our objective. Lady Hannelore, please cause as much confusion around the castle as you can, as we planned."

Hannelore nodded in response, then flew off with Heisshitze and started instructing Dunkelfelger's already wary knights.

"Clarissa," I said, "accompany Lady Hannelore. Your area-affecting support magic should make it even easier for us to confuse our foes."

"Understood. May Angriff guide you!"

After confirming that Clarissa had joined Hannelore's group, I grabbed my Pandabus's steering wheel. "Take care of the directions, Eckhart. I can't read maps!"

Ahrensbach's Temple

The ocean below was as dark as the night sky. We had parted ways with Dunkelfelger's knights, who were headed to Ahrensbach's castle, and were now en route to the temple, which was at the center of the Noble's Quarter. The placement seemed strange to me, since I was so used to the temple in Ehrenfest.

The port soon came into view, dotted with several tiny lights—an indication of nighttime fishers, perhaps. There also appeared to be a number of people moving around. As I enhanced my vision to get a better look, I prayed that no commoners would get wrapped up in the coming battle. There were some normal ships and some large silver things between them.

"Justus, what are those silver things?" I asked.

"Those are Lanzenave's ships, milady."

"They look more like (submarines)..." I muttered, then felt a chill run down my spine. "Could they also be immune to mana?"

"Perhaps," Justus replied. "They were black when they came through the country gate but changed color atop the water." He sounded more serious all of a sudden; had they not given the ships much thought before now?

"That would mean Lanzenave has mana-immune goods other than its silver cloth... Send a warning ordonnanz to Lady Hannelore and the others at once. Justus, Hartmut, how can we warn Ehrenfest and the Sovereignty?"

"Only letters can pass the border gates, but I don't have any ink or paper on me. We'd need to get some from the castle."

"As a scholar serving Lady Rozemyne, I came prepared," Hartmut announced, taking out his letter set. "I shall write to them at once." Barely a moment later, he had sent letters to both Ehrenfest and the Sovereignty. My tendency to write letters to my commoner associates had come in handy.

"There's the temple, milady." Justus pointed ahead of us and to the left just as the first of many explosions thundered above the castle. Dunkelfelger's knights must have started their diversion. "Let

us hurry.”

We passed over the temple gate and descended into the garden on the other side. It was eerily silent. We hadn’t encountered a single guard, nor had anyone raised a shout at our landing.

“This isn’t right...” I said. As glad as I was that we hadn’t encountered anyone—the thought of capturing them and making them take us to the High Priest or High Bishop didn’t sit right with me—the silence was a little concerning. “Does this temple not have guards?”

“We know very little about the operation of the temple,” Justus replied. “The priests brought their chalices to us during Spring Prayer, so we never had cause to go inside. I apologize that we cannot be of more use.”

I shook my head. Justus had already done his best to gather information for us; slipping away from his Ahrensbach peers and sneaking into the temple mustn’t have been possible. “We will need to ask someone in the temple, then. I shall go inside with my name-sworn knights and conclude my business here. In the meantime—Justus, Hartmut, the two of you can—”

“One moment, Lady Rozemyne,” Hartmut interjected. He picked up one of the boxes on the back seat with him and smiled. “This is not Ehrenfest’s temple; we cannot allow you to venture inside before we have looked around ourselves.”

“Hartmut, what are you saying? There’s no time for that.”

“We must purify the temple before we can allow you inside. I shall carry out the process as High Priest, so please wait in your highbeast until my return. If you would allow me, I would ask Laurenz and Matthias to aid me, as they can be ordered to keep their silence. Cornelius, Leonore, and Angelica will remain, both as guards and as those who have not given their names to you. Does that seem reasonable?”

Hartmut was asking my opinion, but his tone brooked no argument. I could guess from his knowing smile that he’d already worked out where in the temple the foundation was located, even though I’d shared that information only with Sylvester.

“Can I assume you know where I plan to go?” I asked, not wanting to be too direct.

“You said you would steal Ahrensbach’s foundation to save Lord Ferdinand and then came straight to this temple. Anyone privy to the circumstances of your disappearance would understand. Not

to mention, the same location is receiving special attention back in Ehrenfest.”

Hartmut was as sharp as ever. He had deduced pretty much everything.

“Am I mistaken?” he pressed.

I saw no reason to dwell on the matter. Hartmut knew where I wanted to go and wasn’t going to let me inside the temple before he had purified it, so it was easier to let him do as he pleased. I took several pieces of fey paper from my bag and gave them to him.

“These are the entrance forms,” I said. “Have the High Priest or High Bishop sign them, then search for the goddess on the bookshelf. Stay on your guard, though—Ahrensbach might have set up defenses just as we did.”

“Understood. Then I must borrow Justus for his capacity to predict, detect, and dismantle traps and tricks.” Hartmut gave the man in question a meaningful smile. “A retainer serving Lord Ferdinand is able to keep secrets, I assume.”

Justus gave a wry smile in response. “I would do anything to rescue my lord.”

“And you, Eckhart?” I asked, wanting to know his plans.

“I shall stay with you, milady. In these circumstances, we cannot reduce your guard even further; Lord Ferdinand would never forgive us.”

Hartmut and Justus climbed out of my highbeast with the box; then Leonore took their place. Eckhart, Angelica, and Cornelius were tasked with defending the area around me.

“I don’t disagree with Hartmut,” I said. “This is another duchy’s temple, so it makes sense for him to check it before I go inside. But having to wait around after we’ve come all this way is agonizing...”

“Given the lack of nobles, he should return soon enough,” Leonore assured me. “I am more concerned about Dunkelfelger. Barely a moment has passed, yet the explosions have stopped. It seems unlikely that they have already conquered the castle, but at the same time, the Knight’s Order has shown not a hint of resistance...”

In the event of a surprise attack, any decent Knight’s Order would start sending out warnings and ringing bells to signify an emergency. But aside from the explosions, we hadn’t heard much of anything since our arrival. I poked my head out of the window of my Pandabus and squinted up at the sky.

It certainly is quiet...

It was then that I spotted an ordonnanz. I stuck my arm out, and the bird perched atop it.

“Lady Rozemyne, this is Clarissa,” came a quiet, guarded voice. “Despite our attempts to create a distraction, we have seen neither hide nor hair of the Knight’s Order. Something most unusual might be happening inside the castle. How should we proceed from here? Should we conquer the castle and search for the replenishment hall where Lord Ferdinand is being kept?”

I exchanged a look with Leonore. “Lady Detlinde said she wanted to obtain the Grutrissheit before Ferdinand ran out of mana. Could she have taken her Knight’s Order to the Sovereignty?”

“I doubt she brought every single one of the knights with her... Let us advise Lady Hannelore to infiltrate the castle but to be wary of an ambush. We will need to reach the replenishment hall at some point anyway.”

I nodded and spoke my response to Hannelore. But as the ordonnanz took flight...

“A white bird, look! We’ve got mana-wielders!”

“Break down the gate!”

“Outta the way! Their feystones are mine!”

Again, I exchanged a look with Leonore. Several people were shouting behind the gate. That wouldn’t normally have surprised us, but the things they were saying were far from ordinary. Barely a moment later, we started to hear dull thuds; they must have been throwing themselves against the small door the guards used.

“They don’t seem to be nobles,” I observed.

“No, they do not,” Leonore agreed. “No knight would speak in such a manner or use such uncouth language. Moreover, nobles would simply fly over the gate rather than attempt to force their way through.”

Indeed, nobles would never waste their time noisily trying to break down a door. And since this temple was right at the center of the Noble’s Quarter, they didn’t even need to deal with the Noble’s Gate, which could only be opened by those who had registered their mana.

“Would the commoners here really react so violently to an ordonnanz?” I mused. It was hard to imagine Detlinde or Georgine allowing them to be so crude, considering their attitude toward the country’s lesser duchies.

“I shall take a look,” Angelica said, then briskly flew up into the air.

Eckhart and Cornelius positioned themselves with their backs to me, keeping a close eye on our surroundings. It wasn’t long before Angelica returned with an update.

“There are three men trying to break through the gate. They are all wearing silver cloth.”

“Then they must be from Lanzenave,” Eckhart said, falling into thought. “Though I’m glad they aren’t Ahrensbach knights, I don’t know why Lanzenave would riot now, of all times.”

Angelica continued, paying him no mind: “They have silver swords and shields. I wish to use this opportunity to see if our weapons work on them and whether I can bind them with my schtappe. Do I have your permission?”

“I concur, master of my master,” added Stenluke from where he was sitting on Angelica’s hip. Hearing his voice made me jump and then sent a wave of melancholy through me. “It would do us well to test these things now, while our opponents are so few.”

“Knowing our enemy’s strength *would* prove useful...” I said. “Angelica, I grant you permission to fight, but be careful—they are surely armed with all manner of poisons.”

“Cornelius, stay here with Leonore and protect Rozemyne,” Eckhart instructed, leaping up the moment he had my approval. “Let’s go, Angelica. Take distance as soon as the gate opens. I’ll go over the top and urge the enemy through.”

True to his word, Eckhart then flew over the gate. Angelica immediately removed the bars keeping it closed.

“Guh?!”

“What the—?!”

The gate opened so suddenly that the three men toppled through it. Their silver clothes gleamed in the moonlight.

Eckhart dropped down behind the men. “Get in already. I need to close the gate again.” Then he kicked each of them into the garden. He must have been using enhancement magic because they flopped in much faster than I’d expected.

One of the three flew farther into the garden than his comrades. Angelica tried to restrain him with her schtappe, but nothing happened.

“Ha, haha...!” The man forced out a laugh, clearly still dazed from the kick. “So much for your surprise attack! Your weapons

won't do a damn thing to us!"

Another of the thugs staggered to his feet and, through violent coughs and splutters, started to mock Angelica. That was the most he managed, though; before he had a chance to bring his silver sword to bear, Angelica stabbed the man at her feet. Her eyes went from her blade to the fresh wound she had opened.

"My weapon seems to work just fine," she observed.

The coughing man stared at his now injured accomplice, no doubt struggling to believe his eyes. The stabbed man looked just as surprised; he tried to press down on the wound, but there was already blood seeping through his clothes. Even in the dark, I could see it pooling on the white stone.

Blood... So much blood...

The sight made me sick to my stomach. Knights needed to be ready to cut down an enemy without the slightest hesitation, but witnessing such brutality always made my breath catch in my throat.

"Angelica, use enhancement magic, not your blade," Eckhart said while choking the last of the three men. "Their weapons and armor are sure to be of great use to us. I don't want them damaged."

Like his associates, the third thug no longer posed a threat; his neck must have given in to the strain because his head now hung at an uncanny angle.

"Cornelius, secure his weapon," Eckhart said, then threw the man aside.

"On it!"

"Eek!"

Cornelius moved at once to bind the man with rope. I, on the other hand, instinctively shrieked when I saw Eckhart discard the man like an object. I turned to see the others' reactions, but they were entirely unfazed. Not even the women among my knights batted an eye. Such was the contrast between civilians and trained combatants.

"Ngh!"

With a grunt of exertion, the bleeding man threw what looked to be a silver knife at Angelica. She knocked it aside with the back of her hand, activating one of her charms made to counter physical attacks. The man failed to dodge it and crumpled to the ground.

"The hell was that?! I don't... We weren't told a damn thing

about this!”

He must not have known that some magic tools reflected physical attacks. The last thug looked around in search of allies only to realize he was now alone.

“Now, your weapon,” Angelica said with a smile. She leapt toward the man, moving so quickly that she left afterimages, and then unleashed a series of precise, majestic kicks.

Leonore sighed in relief, having watched the entire fight from beside me. “Based on the reports, I expected the silver cloth and weapons to be more dangerous. I am glad to see that everything ended so simply. It was a surprise attack against a small group, but the knowledge that the weapons and charms we prepared should work is very valuable. I cannot yet use physical enhancements as well as Angelica, so it eases my mind that I can still rely on my weapon.”

“I-Indeed...” I replied, though our impressions of the battle couldn’t have been more distinct. I tried to avert my eyes from all the blood as Angelica beat the last guy to a pulp, but Eckhart ended up dragging him over to me when she was done. “Um, Leonore... If you don’t mind my asking... does Eckhart normally use physical enhancements in this manner?”

“He fights more like Lord Bonifatius than anyone else. I saw it often enough when at the training grounds that it no longer surprises me, but was this your first time?”

“It was my first time seeing a fighting style not focused on schtappe-made swords. It shocks me that Eckhart and Angelica are so used to physical violence...”

Grandfather’s training has impressive results. This is nothing like when we gathered the jureve ingredients.

Eckhart helped Cornelius and Angelica take the weapons from the three bound men, then swiftly rounded on Angelica. “We won’t be able to use the silver cloth while it’s covered in blood. And since the cloth is immune to mana, we can’t even use waschen to clean it. I wouldn’t have minded if you had fought a crowd of them with your back against the wall, but consider your options when you have the advantage.”

“Got it,” Angelica replied. “I think I understand.”

She doesn’t understand in the slightest! You can’t expect Angelica to think anything through!

As the bound men were having their tools, silver equipment,

and potions confiscated, Laurenz and Matthias returned. Hartmut had told them to come fetch me. I pressed my hand against my chest to feel the temple key hanging around my neck, then climbed out of Lessy.

“Lady Rozemyne, allow me to come with you,” Leonore said.

“Forgive me, Leonore, but I can bring only my name-sworn.”

“Laurenz and Matthias are not enough as your guard,”

Cornelius interjected. “Please bring at least one more person.”

Eckhart stopped what he was doing and stood up. “Justus was allowed to go, so I shall accompany Rozemyne. Everyone else, guard her highbeast. I also want you to watch the prisoners, check their equipment, and share any new discoveries with Dunkelfelger.”

“Understood.”

With that done, he started toward the temple and prompted me to follow. No sooner had we stepped inside than we found gray priests on the floor, bound with light and gagged.

“Hartmut and Lord Justus are already at your destination,” Matthias reported en route. “They are thoroughly inspecting the book room as we speak.”

Laurenz continued, “The High Bishop has been secured, and we have confirmed that the permission form allows us inside as well.”

In short, everything was ready.

Maybe because Ahrensbach was much warmer than Ehrenfest, the windows here were larger than I was used to. Moonlight filtered through them, making the hallway especially bright. I was also feeling uncomfortably hot; the climate hadn’t been much of an issue when I was inside my Pandabus, but my riding clothes were sweltering now that I was on foot.

“Here, milady. The permission form that will allow you inside,” Justus said upon our arrival. He was pointing his schtappe at Ahrensbach’s High Bishop, whose throat was bobbing as he stared at me with pleading eyes, silently begging me to save him.

“I thank you ever so much, High Bishop of Ahrensbach,” I said, accepting the form from Justus. “Please be patient. If you are obedient, we will release you once we are done here.”

The room looked clean but still reeked of dust, and there were far more books here than in Ehrenfest’s temple, maybe because this was a greater duchy. I found myself nearly enraptured.

“Lady Rozemyne, there do not seem to be any traps,” Hartmut informed me. “If the High Bishop of Ahrensbach is to be believed,

none of the temple's many noble visitors have come to the book room."

"None of the temple's *many* noble visitors?" I repeated, my shoulders slumped. "At this rate, Ehrenfest will soon be far behind the other duchies in terms of divine protections, even though we were the first to rediscover how to obtain them."

He looked troubled. "I do not believe they are visiting for that purpose..."

Aah. Flower offerings.

I asked no further questions, so Hartmut said nothing else on the matter. He merely smiled and guided me to a specific bookcase. "Lady Rozemyne, we found a statue of Mestionora here. Is this the one you were searching for?"

"Yes. I thank you ever so much, Hartmut."

I stood in front of the bookcase, retrieved the key from under my clothes, and then touched the bible in the statue's hands. It clicked and opened, revealing a keyhole. I inserted the key and started channeling my mana into it, which caused the bookcase to open to the left and right. There was an iridescent film beyond it, like the one outside the Mana Replenishment hall.

"Lady Rozemyne, we have a stock of rejuvenation potions and empty feystones here," Hartmut said, tapping the box he had taken from my Pandabus. "I will wait here. If you need them, simply ask."

I nodded and then went inside.

Ahrensbach's Foundation and Replenishment Hall

As soon as I stepped through the rainbow film, I noticed a magic circle on the floor right where I was about to put my foot. A small shriek escaped me, but I managed to change course at the very last second.

“Th-That was close...”

I shouldn't have been too surprised—I'd advised Sylvester to do the same thing back in Ehrenfest—but Hartmut's assertions that he hadn't found any traps in the book room and that none of the visiting nobles had even ventured inside had made me too relaxed.

“Was this trap Lady Georgine's doing?”

Detlinde or her elder sister had most likely set it, but I suspected they had done so at Georgine's command. I cautiously tossed a feystone containing my mana onto the circle. There was a light *clink* as it struck the ground; then a furious burst of blue fire shot up into the air.

“Eek!”

The intensity of the flames made me draw in a sharp breath and cling to the wall. The all-consuming inferno looked to me like the embodiment of Georgine's obsession. Even the slightest touch would incinerate me. The most I could do was clutch my chest as I watched my feystone vanish into the blaze.

As the blue fire disappeared, so, too, did the circle, leaving only its pure-white surroundings. I was scared that there might be more traps, but I willed my shaking legs to continue toward the foundation.

Inside a square, windowless room of white ivory, seven softball-size feystones floated in the air. Each shone with one of the divine colors and moved in a circular orbit, reminiscent of the celestial globe in the Mana Replenishment hall. A glittery substance that I took to be golden powder trickled down from one of their cores.

These seven feystones were connected to the replenishment

hall, and the golden dust was the mana coming from it. In other words, it was the mana being sucked out of Ferdinand at this very moment.

As my eyes followed the falling dust, I noticed that one section of the white floor was open, exposing what appeared to be part of a massive globe. Just the area I could see was larger than both of my arms stretched out. This was the duchy's foundation; it glowed with a faint green light, which told me that the current Aub Ahrensbach was Water inclined.

"I didn't realize the real thing was so big..." I mused, peering down at the foundation. Swaying inside the globe was pale-green liquid, but the vessel wasn't even half full. Even though Ferdinand had been supplying his mana for the best part of the day, the foundation was mostly empty.

Has he somehow managed to minimize the channeling speed...?

He wasn't offering mana as part of a large crowd; he was locked up alone, meaning there wasn't a flow for him to get caught up in. I'd assumed that Detlinde had chosen the rate at which his mana would drain, since she had activated the magic circle, but it was moving far too slowly for that to be true.

She wants him to die of mana deprivation, so she wouldn't have set the speed so low. Could this be Ferdinand's last act of resistance?

Still, even if the flow of mana was much slower than expected, it didn't change the fact that Ferdinand was being drained. I watched the falling dust for a moment, then started placing the empty feystones we had prepared on top of the large globe. They would suck mana from the foundation, hopefully making it easier to dye. Of course, going too far would impact ivory buildings and the border barrier, so some caution was needed.

I think that should do it...

Because the foundation had already been quite empty, I wouldn't need to ask Hartmut for any more feystones. I put the ones I'd taken out back in my bag—they had all turned pale green—then formed my schtappe in one hand and grabbed a rejuvenation potion with the other.

I touched the globe with my schtappe, as I'd done during my archduke candidate class, and then started channeling mana into it. I unleashed the mana compressed inside of me in a tremendous burst, hopping to dye the foundation as quickly as I could.

Come onnn!

As I continued to move my mana, I downed the potion in my hand. It wasn't easy trying to dye a feystone this massive. One would normally do it gradually over a much longer time span to ease the burden placed on the body... but I didn't have the leeway for that.

My mana was drying up faster than it could recover, but I still pressed on. I could see the pale-green liquid inside the globe turning light yellow.

Hurry up and dye already!

I chugged the mana-focused rejuvenation potion and continued to channel my mana into the foundation. Over time, the green faded, and my color began to dominate. Then it flashed yellow, announcing that the dyeing was complete.

"I-It's done..."

I was slightly dizzy, maybe because I'd used so much more mana than I was used to. I slumped against the foundation to catch my breath, then stood up and exited the hall.

My attempt to regain my composure must not have worked; as soon as I returned to the book room, Hartmut asked, "Are you feeling alright, Lady Rozemyne? You would do well to rest for a moment, but Lady Hannelore is awaiting the news that the foundation has been dyed."

"I am fine," I replied. "Let us hurry to the castle. Although... I *will* ask for some assistance on the way back to my highbeast."

"*Some* assistance? That simply will not do. I shall provide as much as you require."

I took his hand and forced my legs to carry me out of the room. Then I spoke with Justus, ordered that Ahrensbach's High Bishop be freed, and said to him that he should remain in the temple until a formal announcement came from the castle. All that remained was to free the gray priests.

"Have we received any updates on the situation?" I asked while climbing into Lessy.

Justus had been in contact with Dunkelfelger while I was dyeing the foundation, and he had plenty of news to give me. Their knights had apparently invaded the castle to find not Ahrensbach nobles but people from Lanzenave. They had imprisoned them one after another and were now searching for those wandering the Noble's Quarter.

“Those from Lanzenave are apparently on a rampage—with approval from Ladies Detlinde, Alstede, and Georgine,” Justus concluded.

“But why would they...?”

“According to the report we received, the Lanzenavians have an obvious bias when it comes to their targets.” The main building was untouched, but the northern building for archduke candidates and the western building where Ferdinand was living had both been thoroughly ravaged. The magic tools inside had all been stolen, and the usual inhabitants were nowhere to be seen. “In the Noble’s Quarter, only some estates were raided. It would seem that those branded with a particular mark on the entrance were spared.”

“They are targeting those close to Lord Ferdinand and Lady Letizia, then. We won’t need to worry if they’re in their hidden rooms, which the Lanzenavians wouldn’t be able to open, but...”

If the nobles had been caught unawares and without any knowledge of the silver equipment or poison, they wouldn’t have stood a chance.

“Have the knights suffered any casualties?” I asked.

“The intelligence we shared with them has proved most useful—as of yet, they have not sustained a single injury. In fact, they seem quite disgruntled that they came all this way for true ditter only to face opponents who cannot even fly.”

That’s so like Dunkelfelger that it’s relieving. Or maybe kind of exasperating.

In any case, I was glad to know our allies weren’t hurt.

Justus continued, “We received a report that a portion of the Lanzenavians in the castle and the Noble’s Quarter fled to the Lanzenave Estate, whereupon some of them tried to reach their ships.”

Some of the Lanzenavians were using carriages borrowed from Ahrensbach; since they had come by ship, they didn’t have personal horses or anything of the like. They obviously couldn’t ride highbeasts either, so their movement speed was exceedingly slow.

“As slow as they might be, if our foes who fled manage to hide, trying to find them again will prove troublesome,” Justus concluded.

“Are Lady Letizia and her retainers safe at least?”

“We do not know. The Lanzenavians are tracking ordonnanzes and the light of rotts to find nobles, so we have not tried to contact

them for fear of putting their lives in danger.”

I cast my eyes down. As much as I wanted to believe they were safe, Detlinde had arrived in the Mana Replenishment hall not long after Letizia had rushed out. The two had most likely crossed paths, which meant Letizia had surely been captured.

It would break my heart if an ordonnanz sent to her didn't take flight...

“Justus. If, as you said, Dunkelfelger has chased the Lanzenavians out of the castle, it may be safe to contact the retainers assigned to Lord Ferdinand. Please try.”

“As you will.”

Justus then began sending several ordonnanzes, all with the same message: “This is Justus. I am on my way to the archduke’s office. Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger have purged the castle of Lanzenavians. I am told the northern and western buildings have been ransacked. Are you safe?”

Three of them refused to fly.

Upon our arrival at the castle, Hartmut and Justus climbed out of my Pandabus. Then I shrank it down to a one-person highbeast so that I could continue to use it inside. Hannelore was waiting for us outside the archduke’s office, so Justus guided us through the hallways and staircases meant for servants—the quickest route, apparently.

As we reached the last hallway before our destination, we saw Hannelore standing among a circle of Ahrensbach nobles. Justus’s ordonnanzes had coaxed them out of their hiding spots.

“Lady Hannelore, I thank you ever so much for your support,” I said. “I could not have stolen the foundation without your duchy’s assistance. All that remains is to rescue Ferdinand.”

“Lady Rozemyne...” she replied, evidently relieved. She then turned to look at the nobles, causing her light-pinkish, light-purplish hair to sway. “As I continue to tell you, we simply accepted an invitation to participate in this game of true ditler. If you wish to know more, then you will need to consult Ehrenfest.”

Lady Hannelore, that won't make the situation the slightest bit clearer to them...

I giggled—seeing Hannelore so flustered was kind of adorable—and then addressed the nobles myself. “I can elaborate once Ferdinand is safe. In the meantime, Lady Hannelore, I must ask you

to guard the door so that we are not interrupted. We will not be victorious until we have him.”

“Then guard it I shall,” she replied, sounding more formal than usual. “Secure our victory.”

I asked Justus to open the door—but before I could enter, one of the nobles had a striking realization and rushed over to me.

“Lady Rozemyne! Is it true that you have taken Ahrensbach’s foundation?!”

“Indeed. I could think of no other way to save Ferdinand. And of course, this means I am now your duchy’s aub.” I showed the necklace given to me by Sigiswald and smiled. “As you can see, I am acting with the royal family’s consent.”

I’d presented my necklace as a threat, indirectly warning the man not to get in my way. Upon seeing the royal crest, however, he cried out in delight.

“Aah! You have the royal family’s support! In that case, I beg of you, close the border gate at once! Lanzenave’s ships have yet to leave. If we act now, we can capture them all before they flee! We can save my imprisoned daughter!”

The man must have been an archnoble from one of Ahrensbach’s archducal branch families; he followed me into the archduke’s office as though it were the most natural thing in the world and then began expounding the reasons I should do as he advised. On the one hand, he was in luck; I already knew the importance of closing the border gate. But on the other, he was in for an unpleasant surprise, as rescuing Ferdinand was far more important to me. No way was I going to waste time flying all the way to the border gate when I was already right outside the Mana Replenishment hall.

“If you and Ahrensbach’s knights wish to attack Lanzenave’s ships, then go ahead. You have my express permission,” I said plainly. “Speak with Dunkelfelger; they will tell you how to fight Lanzenavians. Then go rescue your family.”

The man stared at me. “Are you not the new Aub Ahrensbach? Did the royal family not order you to come here and purge the Lanzenavians?!” Again, he begged me to close the border gate. He wanted me to rally the Knight’s Order to rescue his daughter and those who were imprisoned with her. I understood the pain he was going through, but he was in my way. Even this conversation was a waste of valuable time.

“No, I was not sent here to purge the Lanzenavians,” I said, making my stance abundantly clear. “They told me only that I could rescue Ferdinand. If you cannot even wait for that, then I would advise you to dye the foundation yourself.”

I shot the man a stern glare. Out of everyone in the room, he was the only one wearing an Ahrensbach cape.

“And as fate would have it,” I continued, “you are no longer qualified to enter this office. Angelica, if you would.”

“Yes, my lady!” She promptly forced the man out of the room and then shut the door.

Once I’d confirmed that only those of us from Ehrenfest remained, I climbed out of my highbeast. “Justus, do you know where the entrance is?”

“Yes, I asked Strahl a moment ago. You need only look here.” He moved aside a box that was flush against the wall and gestured to what was behind it: a small door inset with a feystone.

Crouching down a little, I touched the feystone and channeled my mana into it. The door steadily grew until it was large enough for me to pass through.

“I don’t see the registration feystone,” I said.

“But of course,” Justus replied with a somewhat confused smile. “You will need to make your own.”

I shook my head. “That’s not what I meant. Ferdinand’s registration feystone has been removed.”

To enter or exit a replenishment hall, one needed to have a registration stone slotted into its door. In other words, even if Ferdinand managed to regain mobility and stop channeling mana into the circle, he wouldn’t be able to leave. Detlinde’s unusual thoroughness infuriated me.

“How is Ferdinand supposed to get out...?”

My original plan to use physical enhancement magic to drag him out of the hall and then get Justus to administer potions was impossible now. I would need to make him a new feystone and then get him to register his mana with it, but that would require him to be conscious.

Justus’s expression changed the moment he understood our situation. “We have only one option, milady: you will need to give Lord Ferdinand the potions while you are inside the replenishment hall. I shall put them in the order they are to be administered. If you find him unconscious, start with this one.”

He opened the box and explained the order to me at breakneck speed. Once he was done, I opened the door to the hall and went to grab the now rearranged potions.

“One moment, Lady Rozemyne,” Hartmut said.

“What?” I snapped. “I’ve already committed Justus’s instructions to memory.”

“Would you be able to stick just your hand through the door, form your schtappe, and clean the entire replenishment hall with a waschen?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never attempted anything like that before.” Confused, I put only my arm through the door and then tried to form my schtappe. “Yes, it would seem so. But why do you want me to? I’ve used an insane amount of mana today and would rather not use any more.”

“There might be poison lingering in the air. A nonlethal dose was enough to put you in a two-year coma, so we cannot afford to take any risks.”

I’d only had such a strange reaction to the poison because of the mana clumps inside of me—but that wasn’t to say I’d since become resistant to it.

“I see...” Justus mused. “That certainly is a concern. Lord Ferdinand developed a strong resistance to various poisons throughout his life. That might be why the instant-death powder didn’t immediately work and gave him time to drink an antidote. We could not hope for the same from you, milady.”

“Indeed,” I said. “If there’s still poison in the air, I might collapse before I even get the chance to rescue Ferdinand...” I wasn’t proud to admit it, but it was the truth.

“I can think of nothing more disastrous,” Hartmut agreed. “You are the only one who can enter the Mana Replenishment hall at this time, so we would not be able to rescue you. That is why I ask that you cleanse the room first.”

“The waschen won’t hurt Ferdinand, will it?” I asked, speaking mainly to Eckhart and Justus.

Justus shook his head. “If poisonous powder was thrown at him, then he is most likely still covered in it. You will need to purify him before you can touch him, so you might as well wash the entire room at the same time.”

I was taken aback by the crudeness of what they were suggesting... but even so, I stuck my arm into the room again and

cast a large waschen.

“That will do,” Justus said. “Please take care of him for us.”

I picked up the box and entered the replenishment hall.

Ferdinand was on the floor, lying exactly as Detlinde had left him.

Rescue

“Ferdinand!”

He didn’t react. His mana reserves must have been so low that he was barely clinging to life.

I sprinted over, set down my box of potions, and used enhancement magic to flip Ferdinand onto his back. Then I put my arms under his and started pulling him away from the magic circle.

“It’s a good thing I’m so much larger now. Physical enhancements can only do so much to increase your strength.”

I prayed in gratitude to Anwachs the God of Growth, asked to grow just a little bit taller, and then got straight to inspecting Ferdinand. He seemed to be breathing irregularly. I sat him up against the wall and reached for the potion box.

“Let’s see... If he’s unconscious, start with the jureve.”

Ferdinand obviously couldn’t drink the potion on his own, so I took out a magic tool that looked a bit like a mouthpiece to administer it. Poison meant to kill someone instantly and turn them into a feystone was best counteracted with a jureve. I supposed that made sense, especially considering that I’d needed to use one to dissolve my mana clumps.

I was used to being fed potions like this, but now the shoe was on the other foot. Feeling tense, I poured the jureve into the mouthpiece.

Any clumps in him should now be breaking apart. Come on, jureve! Work your magic!

Hoping to weaken the poison even further or at least help Ferdinand recover, I added Flutrane’s and Heilschmerz’s healing to the mix.

“Next comes the antidote.”

I put a cloth soaked with antidote into his mouth, as he had once done for me. This would ease the paralysis of his tongue and make it easier for him to breathe and drink potions.

Oh, I think his mouth just moved a little!

My careful observation was bearing fruit. I resoaked the cloth

before stuffing it back in place. Then, when Ferdinand started to work his jaw and his breathing seemed to get less ragged, I removed the cloth entirely and used a syringe-like tool to slowly administer an ultra nasty rejuvenation potion. He would wake up with a terribly bitter taste in his mouth, but it would quickly regenerate both his mana and stamina.

And just as I thought I'd administered enough, Ferdinand began coughing violently.

B-But why?! Have I done something wrong?!

I was no stranger to waking up with the awful taste of a potion in my mouth, but I'd never started spluttering. I must have messed up somehow.

"S-S-Sorry!" I stammered. "It was an accident!" I went to pat Ferdinand on the back, but he seized my arm. "Wha—?"

Ferdinand yanked me down before I could even process that he was conscious. Then he was on top of me, using his body weight to pin me down. He pressed my wrists against the floor, and the chain linking his bracelets dug into my throat.

"Who are you?" he demanded through pained gasps.



Ferdinand must not have recognized me; his eyes were narrowed, and it was clear from his voice that he was on guard. Though the chain wrapped around my neck made it hard to breathe, I just barely managed to eke out a response.

“It’s me! Rozemyne!”

I get it; I’m a lot bigger than you remember! But please try to recognize me! And stop pushing down so hard; the chain really hurts!

“Roze...myne?”

Ferdinand went silent. He studied me up close, then raised only a single hand, holding it a short distance above the ground.

“Impossible. Rozemyne is only this tall.”

“What?! How is it impossible?! And I’ve never been *that* tiny! There are stuffed animals bigger than that! Raise your hand and—Guh!”

Swept up in my own outrage, I’d attempted to lean closer to him—a stupid move, I now realized, as I’d moved straight into the chain. It hurt so much that I seriously felt like I was going to die.

As I coughed and spluttered, desperately trying to recover, Ferdinand slowly stood up and pinched my cheek. His nimble movements before must have been a front, as the strength drained from his limbs barely a moment later. He crumpled back down to the floor, lying on his side and staring at me.

“Have you lost your mind...? You fool.”

“Bwuh... Look, I already know that I took things a little too far. Please don’t get all sanctimonious about it.”

I’d gone through all this trouble to get here; I didn’t want our first conversation now that he was safe to be a lecture. Was it too much to ask for moving words of gratitude or praise, or for something else more appropriate for our long-awaited reunion?

“A *little* too far”? Good grief... You really are Rozemyne. Nobody else would give such an airheaded response while being choked.”

“I’m glad you understand,” I said, getting up and returning to my box of potions. Now that Ferdinand was conscious, he could drink them without my help. “Now, which one do you need next? I... Wait. Hold on. The chain *didn’t* get caught on my neck by accident? You were *deliberately* choking me?!”

I spun around to look at Ferdinand, who was now wearing a

most serious grimace. "Did you truly not realize...?" he asked.

"I mean, I didn't think you'd recognize me, and it was pretty obvious that you were on guard, but I'd just given you a jureve and an antidote! How was I supposed to know you'd attack me? Don't you think it's cruel to strangle your savior?"

"How am *I* the cruel one in this scenario?" Ferdinand retorted. "I shall not state who, but there exists a fool who stole my name and ordered me to live by any means necessary. As a result, in the face of a potential threat, my body moved almost on its own."

"What? But you were half dead. How was I supposed to know you were going to try to exterminate me? Would it not make more sense for someone ordered to stay alive to accept the potion being administered to them?"

Ferdinand averted his eyes. "I... thought it was poison."

Aah, okay. I understand where he's coming from. The ultra nasty potion certainly tastes poisonous.

But I wasn't responsible for the flavor. The onus for that rested on the person who had come up with the recipe in the first place.

"If you're going to complain about the taste, then you have only yourself to blame!" I declared.

"Very well, then you relinquish all rights to complain about being choked. You ordered me to live by any means, did you not? And on that note, why did you not just order me to unhand you? Good grief... Enough with this exchange. Bring me the rest of the potions."

"You're trying to change the subject, aren't you?"

"Not at all. I merely told you what you should do."

Is this seriously how he's going to act after coming back from the brink of death?!

"I cannot yet move freely. First, bring me more of the antidote. Once that has been consumed, do something about these bracelets. Not having a schtappe is terribly inconvenient."

Limp and on his side, Ferdinand started telling me what to do. I was technically his master now that I had stolen his name, so why was he giving me orders? I pursed my lips at this reversal, though I still prepared the potion as instructed and watched attentively as he drank it.

"Is it because you can't move that you feel the need to run your mouth?" I asked.

"I 'run my mouth' because of the manner in which you

administered the antidote. And if you want me to take your complaints seriously, I would advise wiping that great big smile from your face. As it stands, I cannot tell whether you are upset or overjoyed.”

I pressed my hands to my cheeks. Ferdinand was right: I was grinning from ear to ear. I gave my face a few gentle slaps, trying to adopt a harder expression, but it was no use.

“I don’t think I can do anything about it,” I said, conceding to my emotions and smiling to my heart’s content. “I’m glad you’ve recovered enough to grumble.”

Ferdinand blinked several times, then closed his eyes and frowned. “Good grief. You really are something else.”

“Oh? Feeling embarrassed, are we?”

“No.”

I gave his cheeks a few light prods. He raised a trembling arm to stop me but couldn’t muster the strength; it didn’t even get halfway before dropping back down.

Ferdinand sighed with resignation and glared at me. “Mark my words: you *will* pay for this when I am able to move again.”

“I should hope so. As soon as you’re better, I expect some head pats, your sweetest ‘very good,’ and maybe even some hugs. You can also pinch my cheeks if you want. So please... Get better soon.”

A tear rolled down my cheek. It helped that the tension was finally leaving my body and that I could take comfort in our casual exchange. But most of all, I was just so glad that he was still alive. I couldn’t help but sob.

I’d gone to such great lengths to save Ferdinand, securing the support of Ehrenfest’s archducal family, rallying Dunkelfelger, and using the Book of Mestionora without the slightest hesitation. Every time someone had questioned me, I’d declared that I would succeed—but in truth, I’d never stopped worrying. Perhaps we would arrive while he had mana to spare only to find that he had run out of stamina. Or maybe he would regain consciousness to find that the poison had done irreparable damage to his body. Such thoughts had run rampant through my mind.

But I did succeed. Ferdinand is alive. He’s getting better.

He was conscious again. Yes, he had strangled me, but it was a small price to pay to know that he was on the mend.

“Do not weep...” Ferdinand said. He tried to raise his arms again, but to no avail. The most he could do was grimace and

clench his fists. "In the first place, there was no need for you to come to my rescue. Justus must have given you my message, so why are you here? To what end did you come?"

My tears immediately stopped flowing. If he had said that to make me cry more, it would have worked without a doubt... but he was being serious.

"I did not think your memory was so poor, Ferdinand. I threatened you so clearly. To your face, as well."

"You did, but the circumstances have changed immensely since then. I... Why are you getting angry?"

This guy really doesn't get it.

"How could I not?! I said I would make the world my enemy if you weren't happy! And *you're* the one who called for *me*!"

"I did no such thing."

Ferdinand tried to turn his head to the side, but I grabbed his thick skull and wrenched it back, forcing his golden eyes to meet mine. "But you did. I saw what was happening to you from all the way in Ehrenfest. That time Lutz saw me in a dangerous situation, it was because I was staring death in the face and desperately called for his help. That means you must have called out for me, Ferdinand. If you hadn't, I wouldn't have made it here in time."

"Fine. *Fine*. Just let go of me. You are too close. Your face—"

Ferdinand was spouting such nonsense that I couldn't bear it any longer. I continued forcing him to look at me, then took advantage of our close proximity to headbutt him. He grunted from the pain and glared at me.

"*You* are the reason I said you should not have come," he complained.

"Excuse me?"

"You refused to answer my question, ignored all warnings, and went on a rampage to obtain the Book of Mestionora, all of which culminated in Erwaermen instructing you to kill me. Am I mistaken?"

I glared back at him. "He did, but so what? I told him to his face that I wouldn't lay a finger on you."

"Hold on. As I understand it, one of us must die for the book to be completed. And without it, Yurgenschmidt will collapse. What do you think will come of refusing his instruction?"

"Hm? I mean, who cares?" I replied, tilting my head at him.

"There's no point in saving Yurgenschmidt if you're not in it. Isn't

that super obvious?”

Ferdinand stared at me in shock. “What in the world are you saying? You make it sound entirely as if you value me over our entire country. You must choose your words more carefully and—”

“How many times must I say it? The greater duchies, the Sovereignty, the royal family, and even the gods themselves—I would make an enemy of the entire world to save you.”

“I do not believe you said ‘the gods’ before...” Ferdinand muttered, rolling over so that he was face down on the floor. That he could move at all meant he was getting better.

I smiled, observing his improvement. “Oh, is this your first time hearing that part? My apologies, but that’s just how it is. Now, let us come up with a way to complete the Book of Mestionora without either one of us having to die.”

My Geduldh

“I was told that the mana enveloping all of Yurgenschmidt has grown thin,” I said. “Did Erwaermen tell you to complete the book too?”

“He told me your portion was larger than mine and that my immediate death would be the best solution to our predicament.”

Curse you, Erwaermen!

“Well, forget about him. There must be a way we can do it. Maybe we can buy ourselves some time by filling the country gates with mana.”

“How optimistic and naive...” Ferdinand replied, raising only his head to glare at me. “It might interest you to know that I already had a plan—before you came along and ruined it.”

As it turned out, Ferdinand had attempted to meet with Erwaermen the day after the graduation ceremony. He had wanted to complete his Book of Mestionora so that he could create a Grutrissheit to give to the royal family. The problem was that he hadn’t been allowed to visit at the same time as me—and when he’d tried again come spring, I’d already taken the rest of the book.

“You could have told me if you had such important plans,” I griped. “I was going to have the Zent adopt me so that I could get the Grutrissheit at the back of the underground archive. I don’t want to hear you complaining when you didn’t even keep me in the loop.”

“And I do not want *you* to complain when you omitted such crucial information from your reports,” Ferdinand retorted, his brow furrowed. He sat up, scooted over to the wall, and then slumped against it. “Back when I was devising my scheme, the duchies were pushing for you to become the Sovereign High Bishop. I was told nothing about an adoption.”

For a moment, I was lost for words. Ferdinand was at fault for not sharing his plans, but so was I. There was so much I could have told him using my invisible ink, but I’d written only about the mundane. Suddenly feeling very awkward, I sat next to him and

tried to plead my case.

“Sylvester and the royal family swore me to silence. I was dying to ask for your help, believe me. I also had plenty of complaints, but they were the kind that could only be aired in a hidden room.”

“Spare me your grumblings and remove these bracelets already.”
Come on, at least pretend to care!

Ferdinand had shut me down without any hesitation, but I understood that freeing him and discussing the current state of Ahrensbach and the Grutrissheit took priority. I touched the bracelets thrust out in front of me and started searching for a keyhole, but they were completely smooth.

“I *would* remove them for you, but I’m not sure where to start,” I said. “Do you even know where the key is?”

Ferdinand gave me a look of exasperation. “Do you see a keyhole?”

“No, but I’m searching as hard as I can.”

“For what purpose does your bible exist? If you know not how to open them, look it up. You will need to use an unlocking spell rather than a key. My book contains several from past generations, so we need only compare them and fill in whatever gaps we find in the magic circles.”

“That sounds like an extremely tall order...”

Still, it hadn’t even crossed my mind to use the Book of Mestionora. I was consulting mine only in moderation for fear of someone seeing it, but was Ferdinand using his on a daily basis? I chanted, “*Grutrissheit*,” then began searching for how to unlock his bracelets.

“Rozemyne, what is with that bizarre shape?” Ferdinand asked upon seeing my faux tablet and shook his head at me. “Good grief. Be it your highbeast or your bible, your creations all take the strangest forms.”

“It may be abnormal, but my Book of Mestionora is exceptional. The (screen) lights up and can be read in the dark, and there’s a feature that allows me to search for words or phrases.” I stuck out my chest, brimming with pride. “Convenient, right?”

Ferdinand gave me a strange look. “The Book of Mestionora exists to find the information one seeks, so whatever one wishes to know appears automatically when one opens it. As for being able to read in the dark, the letters shine on their own. It seems to me that needing to input words makes your bible *less* convenient than any

other.”

“Th-That can’t be right...”

As I entered a shocked daze, Ferdinand leaned over to peer at my book and pointed at one of the magic circles. “This is the correct one. Draw it with your stylo.” I couldn’t tell the circles apart, but his book had the ones from older generations, whereas mine had the ones from newer generations.

“Copy and place!”

Drawing the circle with my stylo sounded like way too much work, so I used magic to duplicate it onto a sheet of fey paper. Then I activated the circle, and the bracelets restraining Ferdinand dropped to the floor with a loud clatter.

There we go.

“Rozemyne, what in the world did you just do?” Ferdinand asked, wide-eyed. This was *definitely* something to be proud of, so I stuck my chest out once again.

“You just witnessed copy-and-paste magic—my own invention. It has its limitations, but it’s useful, don’t you think?”

“It seems exceedingly abnormal, but yes, I can see it having its uses. Teach me the principles behind the spell, and the correct pronunciation.”

“Is this really the time or place? These are dire circumstances...”

“Is that so?” Ferdinand asked with a frown, opening and closing his hands. “Then explain them to me.”

It would take him a while to rehabilitate, so I explained the situation back in Ehrenfest. He had sent Eckhart and Justus there following the incident with Letizia, so he presumably cared more about things there than in Ahrensbach.

“I see,” he said at length. “Ehrenfest was already anticipating war, then.”

“That’s right. The duchy’s nobles all came together to prepare. I made combat-ready versions of Schwartz and Weiss to help defend the temple.”

“You are as incomprehensible as ever. Was there really a need to have your magic tools made for warfare look like shumils?”

“Lieseleta did it. Besides, what’s the problem? They’re cute.”

As we continued to discuss Ehrenfest, Ferdinand gradually regained use of his fingers. His arms had a wider range of motion now, but his growing frown betrayed his frustration at still not

being able to move as he wanted.

“Rozemyne,” he eventually said.

“Yes? If you have any other questions, ask away. Or do you need more medicine?”

“No, I want your cheek. You told me I could pinch it, did you not?”

That was his question? But he was wearing such a grave expression. And was cheek pinching really appropriate when our circumstances were so severe? Though I’d already concluded that he wasn’t going to give me a serious lecture, I was still taken aback. I couldn’t even begin to imagine what was going through his head.

“I mean, I guess I did... You still can’t fully move your arms, though, can you?”

“I can move them enough. And if we do this now, it should barely hurt at all.”

“I meant you could do it when you were fully recovered, but... if you insist.”

As much as I wanted to protest, it really was better to let Ferdinand do it now while his grip strength was weakened. I sat in front of him, between his legs, and simply waited.

His still-numb fingers brushed against my right cheek and then pinched. Well, if you could even call it a pinch; it felt more like a gentle massage. Would that really be enough to satisfy him? I wasn’t so sure, but then his hand started to wander.

“Ferdinand, that isn’t my cheek.”

His thumb had trailed down to my chin, like he was trying to get more leverage. He must have really wanted to pinch my cheek, I thought, but then green light began to flow out of his ring.

“May Heilschmerz’s healing be granted to Rozemyne...”

The stinging ache on my neck disappeared; Ferdinand must have healed the bruise left by his chain. I appreciated it... but not for long.

“Ferdinand, what are you doing?! You should be focusing on your recovery, not wasting your mana on me! The bruise didn’t hurt that much. It could have waited...”

“It was merely an ideal opportunity to test whether my mana flowed properly. Ah, and now I can produce my schtappe.” He took his hand away and immediately stopped focusing on me, instead turning his attention to forming and morphing his schtappe.

He’s not listening again! Harrumph!

Though he was struggling to stand up and move around the room, Ferdinand was on the mend. I still wished that he would get some proper rest, but his attitude made it clear that he had no such intentions.

“Well, since you appear to have recovered,” I said, “I’ll take a moment to inform everyone and search for a registration feystone for you.”

“Rozemyne.”

I was halfway up when Ferdinand spoke my name, so I got back on my knees. “What is it this time?” I asked while peering down at him.

There was a pause before he said, “Please tell me your Geduldh.”

“What? That’s, um... Do I need to answer here and now? Everyone’s waiting outside.” I’d never expected Ferdinand to ask that question under these circumstances, and in truth, I still didn’t have an answer.

His eyes fixed on a singular point. “I thought your Geduldh was the same as mine—Ehrenfest—yet you accepted the proposal the royal family made to you. So I shall ask again: what is your Geduldh?”

“Bwuh?”

I didn’t have a clue what Ferdinand meant, but when I followed his gaze, I noticed he was looking at my necklace from Sigiswald. I touched it, and he let out a quiet hum of realization.

“Now I remember—it was your dream to marry a prince. You said as much when writing that ridiculous story of yours some time ago. I must admit, I never thought it would one day come true...”

He was referring to when I’d attempted to print *Cinderella* during my days as an apprentice shrine maiden, before I’d understood anything about noble society. I was impressed that he even remembered something he had read only briefly all those years ago. At the same time, though, it struck me that he had misunderstood my intentions. I’d said that I wanted my story to inspire envy because it would make people more invested, but he’d thought I was envious too.

“Hold on! I object! My dream is *not* to marry Prince Sigiswald. In fact, wedding an already-married man without a book to his name would be more a nightmare than anything. Do you really expect me to long for a decline in my standard of living?”

Being torn away from my library and dragged someplace where I wouldn't receive a single new book or even be allowed to get involved with the printing industry until my coming of age sounded awful. Anyone stupid enough to think I might *envy* such an arrangement deserved to have my wrath unleashed upon them.

"In the first place," I said, "my dream husband is someone like my dad: someone who supports me in my charge toward my dreams, who protects me from everything and cares for me without paying any mind to status. Prince Sigiswald couldn't be further from that ideal. This necklace is only meant to indicate that I'm acting with the royal family's authority. It has nothing to do with the proposal. Come, look closer! There are no vows on it, nor is it even omni-elemental."

From there, I explained my *actual* dream for the future: "I want to hole up inside a library and spend my days reading. I want to enjoy delicious food with my family and everyone else who's close to me, read my favorite books, and venture to other libraries in search of works I've yet to consume. I want to be a librarian, helping visitors search for the books they want, restoring old documents, researching magic tools, and establishing a (network) connecting my library with those of other duchies, whereupon I can begin expanding my collection from everywhere at once. *That* is my dream. How could you ever think I wanted to marry a bookless prince and wait years to even resume my work in the printing industry?"

Having finished my impassioned speech, I sighed and dropped down onto my backside, exhausted. Ferdinand gave a wry smile.

"I see. Your fervor leaves no doubt that I made a grave mistake."

"Well, no harm done, I guess. You might have misunderstood my dream, but you're not wrong about the actual situation."

"Excuse me...?"

"Before the next Archduke Conference, the king will adopt me," I announced, maintaining an airy smile so as not to bring the mood down too much. There was no point hiding the news from him now when the conference was right around the corner. "Then, when I come of age, I will marry the next Zent, no matter how far from my tastes he might be."

"You plan to *marry* Prince Sigiswald...?" Ferdinand asked, his jaw actually dropping slightly. He must have been comparing the

arrangement to his own marriage by royal decree.

“Yes, but only because he wants the Grutrissheit and my mana. A former commoner marrying a prince... It’s laughable, isn’t it? The prince doesn’t want me doing anything incomprehensible, so I’ll remain out of sight while they focus on upholding the current balance of power between duchies.”

“And... you would accept being treated like that?” Ferdinand asked, a stern look on his face.

I pressed my lips together and nodded. As long as I could save him, I would accept whatever awaited me.

“You, my lower-city family, the Gutenbergs, my temple attendants... If any of my Geduldh’s were in danger, I would tear Yurgenschmidt apart to rescue them. But if they’re all safe, I’ll do everything I can to protect it. If our country collapsed, the people I care about wouldn’t be able to live their lives.”

I was at peace with my fate. To prevent Yurgenschmidt’s collapse, I would need to complete the Book of Mestionora or retrieve the royal family’s Grutrissheit from the underground archive—and to that end, I would need to join the royal family.

“As a royal, I shall use my authority to its fullest extent to protect those I care about. I won’t let you be executed for Detlinde’s crimes. I’ll pull every string to make sure you can return to your Geduldh. That much, I promise you.”

“You intend to leave me and all those you care about in Ehrenfest...? And you would put them all in *my* care?” Ferdinand asked, looking increasingly bitter. He was likely comparing my future to what he had experienced moving to Ahrensbach.

I smiled, hoping to ease his concerns. “You don’t need to worry about me, Ferdinand. I’m going to be fine. My lower-city family is coming with me to the Sovereignty as personnel, with Lutz and Benno tagging along with the Plantin Company when I come of age. Melchior will take over as the High Bishop and manage the temple, and my name-sworn are all permitted to accompany me, no matter how old they are. I will survive.”

And then I remembered—I still needed to give Ferdinand back his name stone. I took the small white cocoon out of my bag and placed it in his right hand.

“This belongs to you. Although it was to save your life, I apologize for stealing your name. Now that you have your own hidden room, you’ll want to keep the stone there, right?”

Ferdinand cast his eyes down, his hand trembling as he squeezed the name stone. “Do you not...”

“Ferdinand...?”

“Never mind. You make returning me to Ehrenfest sound trivial, but I can assure you, that will not be the case,” he said, his voice weak and dripping with despair. “Rather, it will almost certainly be impossible. I will never be permitted to leave Ahrensbach when the duchy is in such a state. Thus, there is no need for you to go.”

I was hesitant, but I decided to reveal the part of our plans I hadn’t intended to mention: “Umm... This is kind of a secret, but once I’ve been adopted and obtained the Grutrissheit, the duchy’s borders are going to be redrawn. You don’t need to worry—my retainers and I will take care of Ahrensbach in the meantime.”

“Oh...?”

Ferdinand clenched his trembling fists, and the color of his eyes slowly started to waver. He wasn’t prone to emotional outbursts like I was, so seeing these changes in him wasn’t normal at all.

Wait... Have I just awakened the Lord of Evil?!

The Zent and the Grutrissheit

“To think the royal family would prove themselves so foolish... and so *shameless*...” Ferdinand said, his lips curving into a cruel smile as he rose to his feet. He must not have fully recovered yet as his legs were still trembling.

Run, royals! Run while you still can!

As I screamed on the inside, Ferdinand met my eye. “That goes for you as well, Rozemyne.”

“I... I’m terribly sorry!”

I didn’t know why he was so annoyed, but his overwhelming aura compelled me to apologize. Of course, the insincere gesture only made him more frustrated.

“Rozemyne, it would seem that I owe you a debt of gratitude.”

“E-Eep...”

Was there a human alive who would take him at face value? His eyes were swirling with intense emotion, and his voice was so low that it chilled the air.

Nobody who’s grateful pulls a face like that!

“Your words and actions have helped me notice a great many things.”

Faced with such stern eyes, my only option was to employ the most important teaching from China’s *Thirty-Six Stratagems*: if all else fails, retreat! Thankfully, because this was an emergency, excuses were in good supply. Now that Ferdinand was well enough to stand, I needed to report back to my retainers waiting outside.

“Um... Ahrensbach is in a lot of danger right now, and the Lanzenavians are going crazy! Plus, erm... They kidnapped some noblewomen too, I think. So I need to go and—”

“Hmm... Then we should prioritize burning Ahrensbach to the ground and replacing it with a new duchy. To that end, the Lanzenavians’ rampage should serve us well.”

Ferdinand was supposed to be angry with the royal family and me; why was he taking out his frustrations on Ahrensbach? I understood that he was the Lord of Evil and all, but I didn’t see the

connection.

“Hold on... How is *that* the conclusion you’ve come to? Lanzenave is—”

“Ahrensbach’s existence complicates matters for me. Destroying it alongside the Lanzenavians will solve that.”

“But you’d create even more problems in the process!” I glared up at Ferdinand and spread out my arms, blocking his way. “I won’t let you!”

At once, his anger flared. What the heck was I doing? I was supposed to be running from the Lord of Evil, not taking him head-on!

“Why are you protecting Ahrensbach and Lanzenave?” he asked.

“I’m not. But if you attack Ahrensbach right now, you might violate the contract that forbids you from opposing me and die.”

Ferdinand continued to stare at me, but he didn’t seem quite as frustrated; his eyes returned to their normal golden hue, and the look on his face gradually became more guarded. “Why would attacking Ahrensbach violate our contract?” he asked. “What have you done?”

“Time was of the essence, so I dyed its foundation. As it stands, in terms of mana, *I* am Aub Ahrensbach.”

“Excuse me...?”

“It was the fastest method I could think of.”

Ferdinand froze, his eyes wide open as he struggled to process my response. It felt like ages since I’d seen him overload. I must have just said something truly abnormal.

“How in the world was *that* the decision you came to?” he eventually asked. “The fastest method would have been to capture the aub, threaten or even torture her for the registration feystones, and then force her to sign a contract. What lunatic would dye a foundation just to rescue someone?”

“You’re looking at her.”

Ferdinand crumpled to his knees as if completely sapped of strength. He heaved the deepest sigh, then looked up at me and said, “You truly are the biggest fool I have ever met.”

“I mean, having to *torture* someone sounds awful. I wouldn’t have had the stomach, even if we’d come up with a plan that required it. Not to mention, I don’t know what Lady Detlinde’s elder sister looks like. Can you imagine how much time we might have

wasted searching for her?” No matter how I sliced it, using the temple’s key to dye Ahrensbach’s foundation seemed way more reliable. “So, to conclude: leave Ahrensbach’s cleanup to me and return to Ehrenfest. I can take responsibility for what I’ve done.”

Ferdinand stood up again and pinched my cheek. He’d recovered enough that it actually stung this time.

“That hurtsh...”

“You are still clueless, I see,” Ferdinand said, his smile even more terrifying than usual. “At the very least, you are not saying what you ought to be.”

I gave his hand a few smacks while getting teary-eyed. “Then tell me what to say. I’ll say it.”

“Ask for my help. By inciting a rebellion against the Zent, Detlinde is committing treason of the highest order. Her sister is an accomplice, her mother is invading Ehrenfest, and even Letizia is now guilty of attempted murder. If you wish to resolve these issues, then you need my assistance. Nobody is better informed about Ahrensbach’s internals.”

My breath caught in my throat. Ahrensbach’s archducal family was made up entirely of criminals. The commoners and nobles wrapped up in this awful mess without any idea what was going on would surely be furious.

“Your support would warm my heart, Ferdinand... but wouldn’t you rather go back to Ehrenfest? It feels cruel to keep you in Ahrensbach when your time here has been so deeply unpleasant...”

He pulled my ear. “You *just* asked me what I wanted you to say. Have you already forgotten, or did you simply not hear me properly?”

“Eep! Please help me, Ferdinand! Please and thank you! You’re the only one I can rely on!”

“If you insist. I can think of nothing more terrifying than leaving you to your own devices.”

How about unleashing the Lord of Evil? Even during one of my rampages, I’d never propose burning Ahrensbach to the ground!

I glared at Ferdinand while rubbing my throbbing ear... only for him to glare straight back at me. Spooky.

“So, what do you intend to do?” he asked. “One person cannot hold two foundations at the same time, so you cannot become the Zent while you are an aub. You understand that, I imagine.”

That restriction was why Zents had traditionally been chosen

from among the country's High Bishops. It also explained why, when the decision was made for aubs to take the throne instead, those who were chosen to rule had needed to find someone to inherit their duchy's foundation first.

"I do. That's why I plan to get someone else to dye Ahrensbach's foundation. Then I'll either dye Yurgenschmidt's foundation myself or go to the underground archive and obtain the Grutrissheit to give to the royal family."

The fastest way to keep the vessel that was Yurgenschmidt alive was for someone else to dye Ahrensbach so that I could dye the country's foundation. However, considering the walls that separated royals from duchies, that course of action would introduce a whole slew of problems.

"As I see it, I would make the fewest waves by retrieving the magic tool from the underground archive," I said. "Is that not how the royals have always consolidated their power?"

"No, the magic tool was introduced only in recent times, and its existence as a means for the royals to secure their power has caused more than enough chaos. Do you have a correct understanding of Zent candidates and the Book of Mestionora?"

"I understand the basics, at least. They were put in my head when I acquired my section of the Book." And since that knowledge had gone to me, not Ferdinand, maybe *he* was the one who was misinformed.

"In that case, I would ask you to explain what separates the Book of Mestionora from the royal family's Grutrissheit. Any misunderstandings will only complicate our discussion."

"The Book of Mestionora is wisdom forced upon you by Erwaermen in the Garden of Beginnings once you've circled the shrines, received tablets of every element from the gods, and activated the giant magic circle in the sky. It's imprinted on your schtappe, which means it can't be passed down. The Grutrissheit, on the other hand, currently seen as the symbol of a true Zent, was made long ago so that someone who failed to obtain the Book of Mestionora could still take the throne. As a magic tool, it *can* be passed down."

Both contained the knowledge one would need to become the Zent. They were also required for things like activating the country gates.

"Hm. No mistakes so far," Ferdinand said. "Can you tell me

how Yurgenschmidt transitioned from the Book of Mestionora to the Grutrissheit?”

“Even in the past, when several Zent candidates would obtain the Book from Erwaermen, it was hard to absorb such an insane amount of wisdom without spilling any. That was why they created their own (instruction manual).”

“Come again? Do not invent strange words and expect me to know their meaning.”

“Sorry. Um...” I racked my brain for an alternative. “Like a guide. Or a written explanation.”

“It was meant to serve as a reference so that a Zent with an incomplete Book of Mestionora could still carry out their duties.”

The wisdom obtained through Erwaermen contained so many miscellaneous details that it was hard to parse, which was why the Grutrissheit proved so useful. Of course, allowing *anyone* access to such an important book would cause all manner of chaos, so it was kept at the back of the underground archive that only Zent candidates could enter. They would read through it, using the information within to fill any holes in their own Books of Mestionora so that they could perform their duties.

“Had that process continued,” Ferdinand explained, “there would not have been any issues... but Garansorg’s foolishness made it so that Zent candidates stopped visiting Erwaermen. Do you know why?”

“Oh, he was that troublemaker, right? The one who was rejected by the golden shumil and blocked from obtaining the Book of Mestionora, then realized he could learn everything he needed to know from the underground archive.”

“Your explanation does not adequately convey the severity of the matter. Garansorg was rejected by the gods for his dangerous love of war and conflict.”

As long as we were on the same page, I didn’t think “the severity of the matter” was that important. Ferdinand was probably taking everything way too seriously.

To summarize, Garansorg’s dangerous mindset had caused the golden shumil to refuse him, but channeling mana into the library’s goddess statue had made the shape of the Grutrissheit appear in his mind. He had then realized that he could simply acquire the knowledge he lacked from the underground archive rather than bother to go through Erwaermen or obtain Mestionora’s wisdom.

“And so Yurgenschmidt received a Zent who loved war and looked down on the wisdom of the gods,” Ferdinand said.

Being omni-elemental was the only requirement to have the shape of the Grutrissheit carved into one’s mind. From there, one could simply fill its pages from the underground archive. The news that being moral and pious was no longer necessary to become the Zent had spread, and the wars that Garansorg had longed for soon followed.

“People have a tendency to follow the path of least resistance,” Ferdinand continued. “The work required to obtain the Book of Mestionora was gradually ignored as everyone focused instead on the library’s Grutrissheit, which looked the same and contained the knowledge they desired.”

“Not even the pious enjoy the struggles of grueling hard work,” I noted.

No longer did one need to pray at the shrines and activate the giant magic circle in the sky. The number of Zent candidates exploded, and those who would normally have been turned away by the golden shumil started taking the throne through war.

Ferdinand nodded. “The need for Zents to circle the shrines faded, and conflicts became more numerous. Tell me, what happened then?”

“Those who tried circling the shrines were mocked as inferior candidates, as people assumed they weren’t omni-elemental. It was a political scheme to weaken the more diligent candidates, right?”

Back then, Zents and nobles had still performed religious ceremonies on a regular basis, so they had obtained plenty of divine protections even without going to the shrines. Circling the shrines changed in meaning but nothing else.

Ferdinand furrowed his brow and crossed his arms. “You are correct, but are you forgetting the Zent who, in her determination to bring an end to the nonstop hostilities, committed the most foolish act of all?”

I shook my head. “Zent Rauchelstra was so heartbroken by the horrible battles being fought over the throne and the havoc it was wreaking on the holy land that she thought it best to limit the number of people who could become Zent candidates.”

During her generation, every single duchy had produced its own Zent candidates, and the ensuing battles between them had been particularly brutal. As a proper Zent with the Book of

Mestionora, Rauchelstra had turned to Erwaermen, consulted him about the wars of succession, and bemoaned their negative impact. She had perceived the problem as being that *anyone* could take the throne and, to put a stop to the chaos, made it so that only those registered as a member of her family could enter the back portion of the archive. Through her actions, only those from her house, which vehemently opposed warfare, could ascend to the position of Zent.

Rauchelstra then made two guardians in the image of the golden shumil tasked with allowing only righteous individuals to visit Erwaermen: one black, and one white. She placed them in the library to keep an eye on the Zent candidates and ensure that only her family were allowed into the back section of the underground archive. Those who resisted were purged through the Zent's powers, one by one.

To discourage attacks from potential rebels, Rauchelstra moved from the holy land where Erwaermen resided to the current royal palace and made teleportation doors the only way to travel between them. Even if someone who had used the knowledge from the underground archive to obtain their own Book of Mestionora appeared, the Zent could simply execute them, thereby ensuring that only the Zent's kin would obtain the Grutrissheit. It was through this process that the royal family came to be.

It surprised me to learn that Schwartz and Weiss had been created before princesses were even a thing in Yurgenschmidt, and that the "milady" they used to address everyone originally referred to Zent Rauchelstra.

"Her decisions were widely criticized," I continued. "But when the violent battles for power started to wane, some began to praise her. There wasn't even a drop in the quality of her successors, as the royals produced omni-elemental Zents who took religious ceremonies seriously. The era that followed was one of peace."

"Come now, it was a disaster. Because she monopolized the powers of the Zent and started such an iron reign, only a select few were able to visit the holy land. Participation in religious ceremonies plummeted."

During an age when obtaining the Grutrissheit was impossible for most and one wrong move could result in execution, fewer aubs and the High Bishops meant to succeed them visited the holy land and performed religious ceremonies. Enormous rituals quickly

became a thing of the past as the lack of participants forced the royals, who were now performing them alone, to scale things down. Soon enough, even the duchies looked down on the temple and religious ceremonies.

“Not to mention, disputes for the throne then took root within the royal family. It must be said that Zent Rauchelstra had far too much faith in her own descendants.”

That a member of the royal family should take the throne soon became a given. In one generation, a battle between brothers resulted in the death of them both, leaving only the sickly Schubankheit to rule. So that he could carry out the necessary religious ceremonies in spite of his poor health, the Sovereign temple was constructed near his place of residence, and the ceremonies were performed there.

In a stroke of good fortune, Schubankheit begot a healthy child. But by the time that child took the throne, religious ceremonies had already been performed at the Sovereign temple instead of the holy land for decades. The Zent knew nothing of performing them in the holy land, so they continued to be held at the Sovereign temple.

“And with that,” Ferdinand concluded, “the holy land was reduced to a place of education for children from the duchies who came to obtain their schtappes.”

“And that was when people started calling it the Royal Academy.”

Even with the royal family’s many restrictions and their move away from the holy land, they still needed to obtain their own Grutrissheits. To that end, they would visit the Royal Academy’s library, pour mana into the statue of the Goddess of Wisdom, and then write down whatever they needed from the back of the archive.

“The Grutrissheit became a magic tool due to Zent Albsenti loving her son above all else,” Ferdinand continued.

Albsenti had many children, but she doted on only one of them: Neigunheit. She wanted nothing more than for her most adored son to become the Zent, but everyone looked down on him; he was lacking an element and too apathetic to perform the necessary work to obtain it through prayer.

“She was a failure as both a Zent and a mother,” I said. “To begin with, it was purely out of selfishness that she tried to make Neigunheit the next Zent. Didn’t she realize how much anguish the

throne would cause her beloved son? Her form of love was abnormal and deeply biased. I can't empathize with her at all—and to be honest, I think she was one messed-up person.”

“Nonetheless, she was an extremely skilled creator of magic tools. She made a Grutrissheit solely so that her most beloved son could rule.”

And indeed, Neigunheit went on to become the Zent. Thanks to his mother's forceful backing and the Grutrissheit she had given him, which was usable even by those who didn't have every element, the people were forced to accept his rule.

“The magic tool was designed to return to the underground archive when its owner died,” I noted. “In other words, right now, it's exactly where it belongs.”

Having been showered with love by his mother, Neigunheit got his own most beloved son, Rundsein, to inherit the Grutrissheit from him. He did this before his death by registering the tool to the boy's schtappe.

In truth, Rundsein didn't need the magic tool; he was omni-elemental and competent enough that he could easily have gotten his own Grutrissheit. Still, Neigunheit saw the magic tool as the crystallization of his mother's love and bestowed it upon his son as a show of adoration. He also neglected to mention that it would return to the underground archive when its owner died.

And so Rundsein came to assume that the Grutrissheit magic tool was supposed to be passed down through schtappe mana exchanges. He knew that the true version lay at the back of the archive but never sent his son there to obtain it, instead opting to transfer the boy his magic tool, as his father had done with him.

“Thus,” Ferdinand continued, “the Grutrissheit became not something one obtained on one's own but a magic tool passed down from one generation to the next. It does not surprise me that someone eventually came to assume they could steal it and claim the throne.”

“And that was what started the civil war,” I said.

As we both knew, Second Prince Waldifrid had inherited the Grutrissheit magic tool from his bedridden father. Then he died at the hands of the first prince, who wanted to become the Zent. The magic tool disappeared at once, as intended, and returned to the back of the underground archive, where only those registered as members of the royal family could enter. Those who searched the

second and third princes' villas left empty-handed.

The fact that the Grutrissheit magic tool returned to the archive had never been passed down, so nobody in the royal family had any idea where to find it. I only knew because I'd obtained Mestionora's wisdom.

"Thanks to our knowledge of the history surrounding the line of succession, we should easily be able to obtain the Grutrissheit magic tool from the back of the underground archive. Then we can transfer it by *schtappe*," I said. "Mixing mana will take some time, since I don't have any royal blood in me, but letting another royal take the throne in my stead should have the smallest impact, right?"

Once I was married to the first prince and we'd mixed mana, I would give him the Grutrissheit magic tool. It could be passed down like Dunkelfelger's staff of the Goddess of Oceans.

"That was your logic for marrying Prince Sigiswald, I assume." Ferdinand sneered. "You *do* realize that even if you transfer the Grutrissheit to the royals, none of them will be able to read its contents, correct? Will your hard work not be for nothing?"

I could sense his frustration that the royals hadn't even begun studying the ancient language despite his warning. And to be honest, I understood it. I couldn't even begin to imagine how long I would need to wait before they could properly use the Grutrissheit.

"They have such an amazing excuse to read, but they're too busy to take it. You know, Ferdinand, when I met with Zent Trauerqual, he smelled as strongly of potions as you always do. I've been so busy with the handover this year that I've barely had a chance to sit down with a book. I can only imagine how tough the royals have it. I actually feel kind of bad that they've gone years without having a chance to relax."

"How can you speak as though such problems are not your own? If you are adopted into the royal family and married to Prince Sigiswald, you will end up equally as busy—for years to come, might I add."

For a moment, I didn't know how to respond. Ferdinand was speaking the cold, hard truth, but that wasn't something I wanted to face right now.

"I expect to have more time when I come of age and resume my work on the printing industry. Other than that, what can I do? My current ideas include having books from Ehrenfest sent to me each

season as a courtesy and creating a royal decree so that I receive copies of all newly printed works.”

In response to my forced optimism, Ferdinand crossed his arms and gave me a weary look. “What point is there in getting more books if you cannot read them? If you would give such foolish decrees, then you are far from ready to join the royal family. I must find a way to prevent your adoption, clean up this mess in Ahrensbach, and send you back to Ehrenfest posthaste.”

His words pierced my heart. I’d spent so much of my time thinking about how to return him to Ehrenfest that I’d never once considered my own situation. We’d spent so long operating under the assumption that I was moving to the Sovereignty that I’d thought staying in Ehrenfest was out of the question for me.

“What is that expression?” Ferdinand asked. “Are you hiding even more from me?”

“I’m not, but... once I’ve moved, I don’t think I’ll ever be allowed to return to Ehrenfest. I could visit, maybe, but never come back for good.”

“Explain,” he said, leaning closer.

I gave Ferdinand an appropriate summary of my situation: my engagement to Wilfried was no more, and neither one of us had the emotional resolve to repair it, even if my arrangement with the royal family ended up falling through. Wilfried didn’t want to be the aub anymore, whereas Charlotte did. Moreover, now that Melchior was becoming the High Bishop, there wasn’t a place for me in the temple.

“We’ve spent a year preparing for my departure,” I continued. “Were I to return to Ehrenfest, I don’t doubt that everyone would push down their true feelings and welcome me with open arms. But as I can’t become the aub, I’d simply be unwanted and unneeded.”

Returning the Grutrissheit to the royal family was too enormous an achievement. If I went back to Ehrenfest afterward, the nobles there would start pushing for me to become the aub instead of Charlotte or Melchior, and there wouldn’t be anything I could do to quell their enthusiasm.

Bonifatius doted on me no matter the circumstances and would go to extreme lengths to support me, whereas Sylvester would never allow me to become the next aub. I could already see my return igniting a furious dispute over who should rule, which was the last thing Ehrenfest needed now that things had settled down. It would

also ruin all the hard work Brunhilde was putting into becoming Sylvester's second wife and bringing balance to the Leisegangs.

"And my concerns reach beyond the archducal family. The Gutenbergs have been handing over their positions in preparation for their departure. They would be in all sorts of trouble if I suddenly told them they had to stay in Ehrenfest."

The Gutenbergs were in the same boat as me. Leherls who resolved to leave their workshop wouldn't be able to return so easily.

"Ferdinand, the only reason I was allowed to lead my retainers into Ahrensbach on this rescue mission was because Sylvester and the others didn't include me in their defense plans, since they knew I might leave at any moment. No matter where you look, nobody sees a future for me in Ehrenfest."

Ferdinand closed his eyes and exhaled slowly. "So *that* is how things have developed..."

"Correct. So you should return to Ehrenfest while I—"

"Silence," he snapped, pinching my cheek even though I hadn't said anything wrong. "I will consider what is best for you. For now, let us clean up the mess in front of us. We shall wipe away Lanzenave and close the border gate. Come."

Ferdinand marched toward the door, moving at such a brisk pace that one would never believe he'd been immobile just a short while ago. Our long conversation must have given him enough time to recover, as there wasn't a trace of pain in his expression anymore.

"Hold on," I said. "Lady Detlinde removed your registration feystone, so you can't leave until we've found it or made you a new one."

"If nothing else, I see her brain manages to function when it comes to acts of cruelty..." Ferdinand mused. Then he pointed at the exit. "You had to move a wooden box aside to get here, did you not? There are reserve registration feystones within, and the door should open if you have dyed the foundation. Bring one to me at once."

The New Aub

“How is Lord Ferdinand doing?!”

Eckhart practically leapt at me the moment I stepped out of the hall. Angelica was just as quick to react, drawing her sword in an instant to protect me, and the two knights stared each other down.

I put a hand on Angelica’s shoulder, urging her to relax. Then I reported that I’d given Ferdinand the antidotes as instructed, that he’d made a steady recovery, and that he now intended to sweep away Lanzenave and close the border gate. I didn’t include any unnecessary details like him mistaking the rejuvenation potion for poison and trying to strangle me with the chain binding him, our discussion about the Grutrissheit, or his sudden transformation into the Lord of Evil.

“He plans to join the battle now?” Eckhart asked. “Is the poison already out of his system?”

“As you know, Eckhart, Ferdinand has plenty of experience when it comes to disguising his health. I find it hard to believe he is fully recovered, but he is incapable of resting as a normal sick person would. Our only option is to end this as soon as possible.”

Eckhart nodded and said, “I suppose so. In that case, allow me to contact Dunkelfelger.” Then he took his leave.

In the meantime, Justus prepared a box he had brought with him from Ehrenfest.

Now that everyone knew Ferdinand was safe, an air of cautious relief spread through the office. We couldn’t let our guards down, though; our battle against Lanzenave was about to begin.

I took a registration feystone from the box that had previously covered the door to the hall. Then, before returning to Ferdinand, I stopped and turned to my retainers. “As the one who dyed Ahrensbach’s foundation, I will need to close the border gate personally. Guard knights, prepare to leave at any moment.”

“Yes, my lady!”

Back in the replenishment hall, I got Ferdinand to dye the registration feystone. Then I stepped outside again, inserted it into

the door, and signaled that it was okay for him to join us.

Ferdinand made it out of the hall without issue, then studied everyone as if attempting to catch up with the situation. Eckhart and Justus ran over to him without the slightest hesitation.

“Lord Ferdinand,” they said, finally at ease. “We are glad to see you safe.”

“I am sorry to have worried you,” he replied. A faint smile arose on his face before giving way to a much sterner expression. “Rozemyne informs me that Lanzenave has begun a violent insurrection and abducted many. Do you two know the particulars? Eckhart, give me the Order’s report.”

“Yes, my lord! Several knights fell to instant-death poison and silver equipment in what proved to be an entirely one-sided exchange. Strahl said that he prioritized evacuating the nobles in the castle over taking on opponents he could not hope to defeat and instructed as many as he could to hide away in mana-registered rooms.”

Many nobles had apparently taken refuge in their hidden rooms, which could only be opened with their own mana, so there hadn’t been as many casualties as expected. That was good to hear.

Once the door to the replenishment hall was closed again, it shrank back to its original size, and my knights replaced the box that had previously covered it. Eckhart continued his report in the meantime.

“Lady Letizia has fallen into enemy hands alongside Strahl’s daughter; Lady Detlinde was seen instructing Lanzenavians to take them both away. They were the ones who warned Strahl of the instant-death poison before ordering him to flee and rescue the others.”

Strahl and the others hadn’t been able to contact every estate in time, so we didn’t yet know how many had survived the Lanzenavians’ savage attacks. Still, if not for Letizia’s words of caution, I suspected that her entire faction would have been utterly eradicated.

“Have Detlinde, Georgine, and Alstede been captured?” Ferdinand asked. “If not, are their locations at least known to us?”

“Reports say that Lady Detlinde went with Lord Leonzio to the Lanzenave Estate and has yet to return. Others who went there to beg her to stop Lanzenave’s monstrosities have since vanished, and a group who recently ventured inside found that it was completely

empty. Nobody saw them leave, so their current location is unknown.”

“I see... Understood,” Ferdinand replied with a nod and a grimace.

Justus then began a report on Alstede: “Someone from her estate said that she and her husband, Lord Blasius, were invited by Lady Detlinde to the Lanzenave Estate. They have likewise yet to return, so they are most likely still acting with Lady Detlinde.”

“That would explain why your invasion went so smoothly and Rozemyne was not stopped from dyeing the foundation. I thought it best to eliminate the three of them by destroying their registration medals, but I doubt they are still in Ahrensbach. Where is Georgine?”

As he continued to question his retainers, Ferdinand beckoned Hartmut over and got him to prepare some medicine for me. It was infused with kindness, he assured me, so I drank it down at once.

“Lady Georgine has been absent for ten days. She’s supposed to be visiting the giebels of Old Werkestock to perform their Spring Prayer, but we don’t yet know which giebels she’s staying with. None of them have returned any of the ordonnances we’ve sent.”

“Most ominous... They must be supporting her invasion of Ehrenfest.”

The air grew thick with tension. Everyone in the room was from Ehrenfest, so the thought of what might be happening concerned us all.

Oh no. We need to get back right away...

Now that Ferdinand was safe and sound, my thoughts turned to my retainers back in Ehrenfest, the temple, and my family in the lower city.

“Calm down,” Ferdinand said; he must have read me like a book. “I understand your impulse to protect Ehrenfest, but you must prioritize closing the border gate and defeating Lanzenave here so that they can commit no further atrocities. Now that you have stolen Ahrensbach’s foundation and become its aub, this is a duty that *you* must perform.”

Next, he cast his eyes over my retainers. “Those unaware of the situation will most likely assume that your group of outsiders are Lanzenave’s accomplices. Anyone would consider that a far more reasonable conclusion than the truth: that their own archducal family has betrayed them so spectacularly. Such people must be

ignored. You are quashing a treasonous uprising under the royal family's authority and thus have every right to be here. Rozemyne will oversee the operation, and we must ensure that neither the Ahrensbach nobles nor the royals themselves attempt to take advantage. As her retainers, exercise the utmost caution."

Only once our work here was done would we return to Ehrenfest, Ferdinand explained. He considered it likely that the giebess supporting Georgine would back out upon learning that their duchy's foundation had been stolen and their aub replaced.

"Understood."

"Wait, Lord Ferdinand. You are not properly equipped for battle," Justus said. "If you would give me a moment..."

In the blink of an eye, he placed a cape on top of a box, followed in short order by several feystones, potions, and other pieces of equipment. As I stared at him in shock, unable to believe how thoroughly he'd prepared, he gave me a teasing smile.

"Aub Ahrensbach," he continued, "please forgive my rudeness, but we are pressed for time, and Lord Ferdinand's chambers are in shambles. May he change his clothes here?"

"He may. We shall clear the room for you."

Together with my retainers, I stepped outside. Hannelore and the others must have gone elsewhere because they were nowhere to be seen.

Eckhart was just speaking with them, though, wasn't he? What could have happened to make them all leave?

I gazed around, confused, and spotted a group of Dunkelfelger knights filtering through a door at the end of the hallway. It connected to a balcony, so they must have just landed their highbeasts. Hannelore was directing them, and she immediately caught my eye.

"Lady Rozemyne, is Lord Ferdinand safe?" she asked with a smile. She didn't appear to be wounded, but the same couldn't be said for the knights behind her. Considering their previous complaints that the Lanzenavians were lousy opponents, something must have changed.

"Lady Hannelore, what happened to the knights?" I asked. "They're injured."

"Lanzenave's soldiers are no more dangerous than before, but we are struggling to conquer their ships."

Dunkelfelger's knights hadn't been at all threatened when they

were just knocking about the Lanzenavians wandering the Noble's Quarter and the Lanzenave Estate, but the soldiers who had retreated into their ships now had access to better weaponry. They were using some kind of artillery device that shot out volleys of slender silver needles to protect themselves.

"We sent ten knights disguised as either Lanzenavian soldiers or kidnapped noblewomen to infiltrate the ships," Hannelore explained. She had been waiting outside the archduke's office at the time, so she was relaying this information from Heisshitze, who had witnessed it from the front lines. "Ordonnanzas are unable to pass through their silver walls, though, so..."

There was a short pause before Hannelore continued, "The ships are completely immune to mana, and the silver needles that come out of their weapons pierce through armor and even highbeasts. We dispelled our mounts and attempted to breach the vessels, but the most we could do was scratch them. Our non-magical weaponry is designed for individual warfare and not much else. Thus, we returned to form a counterplan."

"I am grateful that you would attempt such a direct attack, especially while under fire from armor-piercing weapons you had never seen before. I shall consult with Ferdinand. Those of you who are wounded, step forward. I will heal you."

I made Flutrane's staff and collectively healed anyone who was injured.

"We have a portion of Ahrensbach's knights guarding the border gate," Hannelore told me. "They will send word if Lanzenave's ships begin heading in their direction. Moreover, the nobles demanding to meet their new aub have been gathered in a meeting room. Many of them were poor listeners, and some of our knights lost their patience with them, resulting in some shouting and rough treatment. Please forgive them."

In other words, the knights had decided that the loud nobles demanding to be let into the archduke's office were detrimental to our mission and that it was best to lock them in another room. Said room was of course being watched so that those inside wouldn't be attacked by Lanzenave's soldiers.

"I *did* ask for the door to be guarded," I said, "so I take no issue with what happened. Your assistance is greatly appreciated. But, um... Maybe two bells have passed since our arrival. What are Dunkelfelger's plans? I must head to close the border gate, and

Ferdinand seems ready to begin purging the Lanzenavians.”

I was hoping to hear Hannelore’s opinion, but Heisshitze took a brisk step forward before she could speak. “We will participate, of course,” he said, his voice firm. “We finally have worthy opponents, and we will not squander this chance to fight alongside Lord Ferdinand.”

“Um, Lady Hannelore...” I turned to her for confirmation, and she returned a somewhat troubled smile.

“Because our enemy has been so weak, we have barely even touched our magic tools and rejuvenation potions. I would consider it far more dangerous if our knights, who came here on the promise of true ditto, went home without having done very much at all. You would be doing me a great favor by allowing them to continue fighting.”

In short, they want to cut loose a little before they leave. I understand completely.

Dunkelfelger’s knights were as hot-blooded as they looked. As soon as they’d recovered from their injuries, they started discussing how to conquer Lanzenave’s silver ships.

“How about we throw massive boulders? If we enhance ourselves enough, we might be able to punch a hole through them.”

“Come on, think! That could injure the women inside!”

Leaving them to their chatter, Hannelore turned to me and started. “Oh? Lady Rozemyne, it might be wise for you to remove your necklace. I do not mean to sound rude, but the chain appears to be degrading.”

“Hm?”

I touched the necklace. As she had said, the metal parts of the chain had gone from being smooth to unusually rough. It felt rusted, even. When I looked at my fingers, I saw that they were speckled with gold dust.

Confused, I removed the charm. I could tell at a glance that only the parts that had been in contact with my skin were crumbling away. “I received it earlier today... Was I given a low-quality chain?”

Hannelore forced a smile. “Not exactly. The chains of courting magic tools are made from their creator’s mana and will experience great strain if worn by someone who possesses even more. I suspect you used a tremendous amount of mana while wearing that necklace.”

“I... might have an idea as to how that happened.”

Since putting on the necklace, I’d supplied two country gates, teleported several times, and dyed a foundation. Of course I’d used too much mana recently. Nevertheless, there was one thing that didn’t quite make sense.

“Um, Lady Hannelore... We learned about courtship magic tools in class, so I can’t help but wonder—aren’t they supposed to complement the wearer’s elements and have vows engraved within them? This charm meets neither criterion.”

“We learned about *proposal feystones*. Those are obviously made to the highest possible standard, but courtship magic tools are customarily kept at a slightly lower quality. Instead of a vow, they are engraved with a name or crest to show who is courting the wearer, and a key aspect of them is that they leak out mana.”

Surprised, I stared down at the necklace, which I’d previously seen as little more than a permission slip for wreaking havoc. Hannelore said it leaked mana, so why couldn’t I see any? Perhaps it would be best to ask Ferdinand when he next had a moment.

Oh, now that I think about it, seeing this charm was what made Ferdinand mention my engagement to a prince. Am I the only one who didn’t recognize it as a courtship magic tool...?

Hannelore giggled, drawing me from my thoughts. “This has crossed my mind many times during our lessons, Lady Rozemyne, but even though you seem to be a wellspring of wisdom and came first-in-class all those years in a row, you know almost nothing about the subtleties of courtship or the finer points of how men and women behave around each other.”

“I will admit, I am not well-versed in those subjects, but the fault lies with Ferdinand for not including them in my lessons.” His reluctance to teach me about matters of the heart was also why I’d always struggled to follow along with Elvira’s love stories.

Hannelore gave me a look of concern. She was at a loss for words.

Leonore was standing behind me as a guard, but she leaned forward to clear up my misunderstanding: “Those topics are not for a man to teach.”

Oh. Fair enough.

Hartmut took out a piece of cloth. “Lady Rozemyne, I would advise that you wrap the necklace in this and then stash it inside a bag. We would not want to lose our symbol of the royal family’s

authority.”

I accepted the cloth, wrapped up the charm, and then put the small bundle in the pouch on my hip. I'd never expected such a critically important accessory to be this fragile.

Still, to think it was a courtship charm... I wonder what Prince Sigiswald was thinking when he sent it.

Our marriage was going to be the result of a royal decree, not a genuine connection. I would never have gone along with it otherwise. Was there really a point in sending me anything but a proposal feystone?

“There you are, Rozemyne. I... What is going on here?”

Ferdinand stepped into the hallway fully clad in feystone plate armor and almost recoiled when he saw the blue-capes. Dunkelfelger's knights lined up by the wall and immediately knelt before him.

“Why are there knights from Dunkelfelger here in Ahrensbach's castle?” Ferdinand demanded, his eyes piercing me like daggers. He had never been good at dealing with surprises.

Oops. Guess I omitted a few very important details...

I donned a fake smile and attempted some damage control. “Ohoho... These are volunteers who came to help with your rescue and participate in a game of true foundation-stealing ditter.”

“I could not be happier to see you safe!” Heisshitze declared, standing up and marching over with a broad smile. In one smooth motion, he removed his cape and held it out to Ferdinand, who grimaced in response. “You may have this back. I should receive it only when I have bested you in a fair and honest game of ditter.”

“I do not want it. Keep it.”

Gaaah... This is playing out exactly as I expected.

True to his duchy's reputation, Heisshitze remained enthusiastic even in the face of such a cold refusal. “Though I acted with the best intentions, anyone can see that I caused you more harm than good. I intended to save you, Lord Ferdinand, but I failed spectacularly. This time, I *will* succeed. This time, I shall be of—”

“This is a waste of time,” Ferdinand interrupted, making a shooing motion with his hand. “We must go to the border gate before Lanzenave escapes and purge them from within.”

Heisshitze gave a proud smile and said, “You have my sword. We are here to answer Lady Rozemyne's call for aid; once everything is over, the two of us can discuss our next ditter match

at our leisure.”

“Once everything is over, you say? I will see you in ten years, then.”

“Ten years? Nay, I shall see this through much sooner. Let our rematch never be forgotten.”

Holy crackers. It's like he's immune to Ferdinand's attitude.

Heisshitze had challenged Ferdinand to so many ditter matches during their Royal Academy days that he now took blunt rejections in his stride. He was a Dunkelfelgerian through and through.

“In any case,” Ferdinand continued, “why are we the only ones here? What happened to Ahrensbach's knights?”

Leonore relayed the information that Hannelore had given us and explained the most recent developments in our battle against Lanzenave.

Ferdinand rounded on me and pinched my cheek. “Just how abnormal can your methods be?” It was an entirely unjustified reaction, if you asked me.

“I could never have saved you by acting within the realm of common sense,” I protested. “And it was because Dunkelfelger's knights agreed to help us that we were able to secure the foundation without being harmed and rescue you before it was too late. You should be thanking them.”

Ferdinand paused in thought, then looked at the overenthusiastic knight in front of him. “Alright, Heisshitze. If, after we close the border gate, you capture every single Lanzenavian still in Ahrensbach, I will take you to Ehrenfest as you so desire.”

“Take him to Ehrenfest?!” Hannelore repeated, eyes wide. “For what purpose, exactly?”

Dunkelfelger had agreed to come with us to Ahrensbach, but we hadn't said anything about them joining the fight in Ehrenfest. It was only natural that Hannelore, their commander, was so surprised, but Ferdinand continued without paying her any mind.

“Rozemyne might have stolen Ahrensbach's foundation, but protecting one's own treasure is just as important. If a duchy does not have good enough defenses, even the strongest knights can easily taste defeat. I expected you to know that, considering how many times your duchy lost its treasure to me.”

Many of the knights winced as if personally wounded. They must have been from Ferdinand's generation.

“To summarize, this game cannot be considered over until

Ehrenfest's foundation has been protected," Ferdinand declared. "Lanzenave is attacking with all manner of unexpected tools, from weapons to poisons, so we cannot let our guard down until true victory has been secured. Serve under me, Heissshitze. Together, we will crush our foes into nothing."

"Yes, sir! We are yours to command, and our game of true ditter shall continue!"

"Aye, aye!" the knights chorused. Then they rose from their knees, returned to the balcony, and took to the skies on their highbeasts. Their enthusiasm was a bit much, if you asked me, but the speed with which they acted made them very reliable.

Hannelore looked thoroughly beaten, but she nodded a few times and repeated that sending the knights home in their current state would only cause trouble.

"Justus," Ferdinand said, "while I am absent, rescue the nobles from their hidden rooms and gather all the intelligence you can."

"Understood, my lord."

"Hartmut, Clarissa, you are to free the Ahrensbach nobles currently under watch, explain that Rozemyne is by all means a much better aub than Detlinde, and extol the virtues of her sainthood. Beat it into them that their entire duchy will crumble without her at the reins. I do not care if you need to brainwash them to the point that they kneel at the sight of her; I am relying on you both to ensure that she is smoothly accepted as Aub Ahrensbach."

"You may count on us!" they declared.

My stomach started to ache. "Um, Ferdinand... Should you really be leaving this to them? I feel kinda... No, *really* uneasy..."

"I can think of nobody better to extol your virtues. Now, has your mana replenished yet?" His eyes betrayed concern as we strode toward the balcony. "As you are the aub, we will... need to push you a little bit further."

I smiled and shook my head, hoping to calm him down. "I just drank a potion, so you don't have anything to worry about. Not to mention... The real battle starts now, right?"

Ferdinand had just come back from the brink of death, yet he was more focused on defeating his enemies than recovering. He had to be, since this truly was the decisive moment.

"Good. Then let us go," he said. "As the ruling Aub Ahrensbach, it falls to you to settle this madness and get your duchy under

control.”

Once outside, Ferdinand made his highbeast with a vicious, evil grin. An ordonnanz appeared at the same moment. The white bird landed on Eckhart’s arm and started speaking in a man’s voice.

“Eckhart, this is Strahl. Lanzenave’s ships are on the move! We suspect they are using the break in Dunkelfelger’s offensive to flee through the country gate. Has Lord Ferdinand recovered yet? We need orders!”

Upon delivering its message for a third time, the ordonnanz turned into a feystone. Eckhart took it; then Ferdinand tapped it with his schtappe.

“This is Ferdinand. The aub and I are headed to close the country gate. Do not attack, and do not reveal yourselves. Just lie in wait.”

The Aub's Protection

We flew out of the castle on our highbeasts. Ahrensbach was much warmer than Ehrenfest, so although it was only around the time of Spring Prayer, it felt humid enough to be the start of summer. The duchy had been shrouded in darkness when we'd arrived, but now the sky was turning from purple to faint yellow, casting light on the white port and the Noble's Quarter. There were no walls or gates around the lower city as there were back in Ehrenfest.

Atop the ocean, which was one shade darker than the sky above, three slow-moving silver vessels made for the border gate. A fourth was still sitting at the port; its crew hadn't yet finished preparing to leave, I gathered.

Ferdinand sent an ordonnanz to the Ahrensbach and Dunkelfelger knights keeping an eye on the Lanzenave Estate, instructing them to stay in position. Then he sent several more.

Word of our situation had reached the knights still in the castle, and those carrying out rescue operations all over the Noble's Quarter were gathering back together. They couldn't believe their eyes when they caught sight of my Pandabus. One of them shouted, "A grun!" and produced his schtappe, but the others quickly intervened.

"No, that's not a feybeast!" they cried. "That's the new aub's highbeast!"

L-Lessy's not a grun...

"Eckhart, Heisshitze," Ferdinand said, "form squads of ten knights each and assign them captains. Each squad is to receive its own orders. Captains, commanders, and their retainers are to land on the gatepost of the outer wall. Everyone else, remain airborne."

"Sir!"

Eckhart and Heisshitze received their orders while flying their highbeasts and got straight to work organizing their squads.

"Rozemyne, over there is the gatepost I mentioned," Ferdinand continued, nodding at the wall ahead of us. "Once we land,

distribute magic tools to each squad.”

“Can do,” I replied. “Matthias, Laurenz, Leonore, Cornelius, do what you can to assist me. Angelica, remain on guard duty.”

“Understood!”

The captains and commanders slowed down as we neared the wall around the Noble’s Quarter. Then everyone who wasn’t using a drivable highbeast packed with luggage dismissed their mount. We distributed flash-bangs to Squads One and Six, area-enhancing tools to Squads Two and Seven, and so on, doing as Ferdinand instructed.

“Lady Hannelore,” he said, eyeing her drivable shumil-shaped highbeast, “you are more than welcome to return to the castle and rest with your guard knights.”

Hannelore gave a troubled smile and shook her head. “I came here to restore my honor and wipe away the shame of my surrender during our previous ditler match. Running away again would not be acceptable. At the moment, I am contemplating whether the wolfaniels we acquired in the Noble’s Quarter could be brought into the Lanzenavian ships.”

She gestured to the back of her highbeast, where three wolfaniels were lying with their heads down. They looked very similar to dogs and were, like shumils, rather popular pets among the nobility.

She wants to send pets into the ship?

I wasn’t at all sure what Hannelore was planning, but Ferdinand realized straight away. “An interesting idea,” he muttered. “I can see them being an excellent counter to Lanzenave’s soldiers. You truly are a Dunkelfelger woman.”

I couldn’t tell whether that was a compliment, but judging by Hannelore’s shy smile, she certainly saw it as one. I decided to do the same.

“In that case, Lady Hannelore,” Ferdinand continued, “you can deal with the ship still at the port. Take the first and second squads with you to rescue the prisoners and serve as guards.”

“As you will.”

Ferdinand pointed to the ocean, where the silver vessels in motion were slowly accelerating. “As you know, mana does not work on those ships, but you might not have considered that mana is needed to teleport. The ships will need to turn black when they reach the gate, and that is when we will strike.”

We needed the Lanzenavians to believe they were going to get

away. For that reason, we intended to keep our highbeasts a sensible distance behind the ships—just far enough that we could speed up and catch them when the moment was right.

“Rozemyne, once the ships turn black, I want you to grant the prisoners within the aub’s protection,” Ferdinand continued. “Then we will strike the ships and reduce them to nothing. The black material still absorbs mana, so a half-hearted attack will not do. Go all out.”

“Reduce them to nothing?” I exclaimed. “But what about the prisoners?!”

“As I said, the aub’s protection will ensure their safety. We can retrieve them once they have been flung into the ocean.”

You only ever care about results!

But at the same time, he was right to be so cautious; if we allowed the ships to return to Lanzenave, we would render ourselves powerless. Fighting here on our home turf was vastly superior than trying to wage war in unknown territory.

“Rozemyne... I must give you my thanks,” Ferdinand said. “Such forceful means are only available to us because you are the aub and we have so many capable knights at our disposal.”

From there, he gave each squad instructions on when to attack. I was directed to take out my box of rejuvenation potions.

“Once the battle begins, you will not have the leeway to fly around and distribute potions,” Ferdinand noted. “Leave them and the magic tools to the apprentices. Assign one of your guard knights to oversee them.”

“Allow me, Lady Rozemyne,” Laurenz volunteered. “I now know how to enhance my vision, so I won’t have any trouble seeing who needs supplies and sending the apprentices to them. Plus, I’m an apprentice myself.”

That made sense to me.

“Rozemyne, dispel your highbeast,” Ferdinand ordered. “You shall ride with me.”

“Hm? Why?” There was no longer any luggage inside my Pandabus, but that didn’t mean we suddenly had to ride together.

“Your highbeast looks like a foolish grun to the people of Ahrensbach. Just a moment ago, a knight went to attack it, and attacking the aub is an act of treason. Would you *like* to have more executions to perform?”

Indeed, most of Ahrensbach’s knights had never met me before,

so it stood to reason that they weren't used to my highbeast. My Pandabus was cute, but riding it wasn't an option.

"Your so-called drivable highbeast will complicate my instructions and make it harder to close the border gate. Moreover, it will prevent others from being able to see you during this excellent opportunity to flaunt your status."

Ferdinand wanted to make it abundantly clear that I was Ahrensbach's new aub. I couldn't help but think back to how many blessings I'd needed to give when being adopted into the archducal family. Now that Hartmut and Clarissa were operating at full capacity in the castle, I was bound to end up even more swamped.

As I wavered, not wanting a repeat of that situation, Leonore stood protectively in front of me. "Though I understand your argument, Lord Ferdinand, it would be improper for Lady Rozemyne to ride your highbeast. She can have a seat on mine."

"That's right," Cornelius added, likewise moving to protect me. "Lady Rozemyne should ride with a female knight. Few people here recognize you as her guardian. For her sake, allow her to travel with Leonore."

Ferdinand raised an eyebrow and simply said, "No. Leonore is not an archduke candidate, so a problem of some kind will surely occur."

Magic used by the archducal family needed to be kept secret. That was why archduke candidates being taught at the Royal Academy couldn't even have their retainers in the room with them. The professors of the course were historically members of the royal family or an archducal family who married into it. Were I to ride with Leonore, I wouldn't be able to use certain archducal spells despite the urgency with which I needed to close the border gate and protect the citizenry.

"Rozemyne's only other option would be another female archduke candidate," Ferdinand concluded.

Cornelius looked around, urgency in his eyes. "Ah, what about Lady Hannelore?"

Hannelore cast her eyes down, looking especially awkward. "Um, my sincerest apologies, but my highbeast is also drivable. I would encounter the same issues as Lady Rozemyne. Plus, as I plan to infiltrate an enemy ship in my capacity as a commander, Lady Rozemyne will struggle to stay with me..."

Obviously. Making such a request of an archduke candidate from a

greater duchy is just ridiculous.

"Cornelius, that was very rude of you," I said. "My deepest apologies, Lady Hannelore. It was unacceptable to put you on the spot like that."

"Oh no, no. It is only natural that your guard knights are concerned. But at the same time... I understand why Lord Ferdinand demands such caution. We cannot risk Ahrensbach's knights attacking their own aub. You have dyed their foundation, Lady Rozemyne, but you have yet to establish your rule."

Hannelore expressed understanding for both parties. No matter what, I couldn't risk riding inside Lessy.

"Rozemyne, let me warn you as your older brother: if you ride with Lord Ferd—"

"Shut it, Cornelius," Eckhart said, fixing his younger brother with a glare. "Who cares how it might look? Rozemyne has already become Ahrensbach's archduchess to save Lord Ferdinand, and our enemy's ships have started to move. We don't have time to worry about appearances. Rozemyne, as your older brother, this is an order: do as Lord Ferdinand says. Now!"

"Right!" I replied. "Let's go, Ferdinand."

Eckhart's phrasing had been kind of cruel, but I wasn't even going to think about saying no when he looked so intense. I rushed over to Ferdinand and held out my hand.

"Do not delay us for trivial reasons," he said, taking my hand and pulling me up onto his lion. It was hard and not very secure. He was also wearing armor, so unless I was careful, I would continuously bang my head against his breastplate.

"Your highbeast is less comfortable than mine," I said. "And are you sure I won't fall...?"

"Do not be so foolish. You could have made a normal highbeast to begin with. Furthermore... you have grown too much. Your head is obscuring my vision."

Um, excuse me? I'm being foolish? Talk about the pot calling the kettle black.

I was still thoroughly unconvinced, but Ferdinand paid me no mind; he took us up into the air and then accelerated in the direction of the port. Of the four silver vessels I could see, only two were advancing toward the country gate; one had stopped a short distance from the shore for some reason, while the other had still yet to depart.

“Ferdinand, the stalled ship might be the one our knights infiltrated,” Heisschitzte shouted, and pointed below. “They could be seizing the deck as we speak.”

Indeed, the ship had probably stopped moving because there was a battle raging on inside. It was hard to imagine Dunkelfelger’s knights losing to Lanzenavian soldiers in close-quarters combat.

“Still, I don’t understand why the fourth ship hasn’t even departed yet...” I muttered. Its swaying back and forth looked very unnatural.

I enhanced my vision to take a closer look. The silver-clad Lanzenavians weren’t the only ones on the port; I could also see commoners dressed in rags. They were tanned, burly fishermen from the look of things, and they were swinging around nets and overturning wooden crates with furious expressions.

As the scrap continued, I noticed several small explosions. Were the fishermen pelting their opponents with spresches? Lanzenave’s soldiers were fighting back with swords and shields in what could only be described as a free-for-all.

“Ferdinand, it looks like the fishermen are fighting the Lanzenavians,” I said. “Someone dressed in silver cloth was just dragged out of the ship.”

“The commoners are stalling them? Then using wolfaniels would pose too great of a risk... Lady Hannelore! We must change our plans! There are too many commoners by the vessel; I must ask that you infiltrate it only after Rozemyne has granted them the aub’s protection!”

“Yes, sir!”

Hannelore paused her descent, while Ferdinand gave me further instructions: “Rozemyne, grant Heilschmerz’s healing to any Ahrensbach citizens who have sustained injuries in the battle. Then grant the aub’s protection to that entire section of the port.”

“On it!”

I created my schtappe, then turned it into Flutrane’s staff. Green light overflowed from the tip and rained down around the ship as I granted the commoners Heilschmerz’s healing.

The fighting stopped as everyone stared skyward, and shouts of confusion rang out across the port. The injured fishermen cried out, “It’s a miracle!” as their wounds quickly faded; then I returned my schtappe to its usual shape.

The aub’s protection.

I took a deep breath, then started pouring mana into my schtappe. This spell was exclusive to aubs, and as the name implied, it protected the citizens of one's duchy. It would work only for a short while, but in that time, it would negate attacks of every kind. I'd witnessed the spell as an apprentice shrine maiden, though I hadn't known anything about it at the time; Sylvester had used it during Spring Prayer to protect his people.

"*Vollkowesen*," I said, and swung my schtappe. A large yellow bird shot forth and scattered golden dust over the port before slowly crumbling away. Ahrensbach's citizens—and *only* Ahrensbach's citizens—were now completely safe.

"This protection..."

"Lady Rozemyne truly has become the aub."

Ahrensbach's knights stared in wonder at the dust falling upon them. Only those registered as citizens of the duchy could receive the aub's protection, so while faint yellow light enveloped us all, neither Ferdinand nor I, nor our retainers, nor Dunkelfelger's knights, nor the pre-baptized children were affected.

"Squad Six, flash-bangs!" Ferdinand shouted. "Squad Seven, large-scale waschen! Sweep the enemy soldiers away!"

Because those on the port were still gazing up at the lights of healing and protection, the thrown flash-bangs exploded right before their eyes. The Lanzenavians recoiled, and the waschen that followed swept them straight into the sea.

The ships tied to the port swayed and bumped into each other as the water crashed over them. Others lost their mooring lines and were carried out to sea. But amid this chaos, Ahrensbach's citizens were safe; they merely stared up at us, their mouths agape.

"Squads Three through Five, change of plans!" Ferdinand roared. "Order the commoners to return home while they are still under the aub's protection! Bind the Lanzenavians, rescue any hostages, and then follow Lady Hannelore's instructions for retrieving feystones!"

"Sir!" the three squads wearing light-violet capes chorused. Then they flew down to where most of the fishermen were crowded.

"Squad One, Squad Two!" Hannelore barked. "Come with me!" Together with the blue-capes, she headed down to the moored ship. Those standing nearby retreated a short distance, giving them space to land.

Upon touching down, Hannelore took the wolfaniels out of her shumil-shaped highbeast. In the blink of an eye, they went from being medium-size dogs to great big wolves and tried to pounce on the nearby commoners.

“No. Bad,” Hannelore said, binding the wolfaniels with light moments before they could sink their teeth into the fishermen and then pulling them closer. They obeyed without question.

From there, Hannelore said something to the wide-eyed commoners. Then she instructed the knights, and together they charged into the ship. Given that the Lanzenavians were still preparing to leave, its door was wide open.



Lanzenave's Ships

As we soared over the ocean toward the border gate, I took a moment to ask Ferdinand some questions: "Wolfaniels are feybeasts, right? Can you tell me more about them?"

"Wolfaniels obey anything that surpasses them in mana and attempt to devour anything in motion that does not. So indiscriminate is their hunger that attendants must put them outside before moving furniture; otherwise, the wolfaniels will try to consume it."

"Wow, they really are indiscriminate..." I said just as an explosion shook the stalled ship below. Part of its hull shot up into the air.

Ferdinand wrapped an arm around me, using the other to keep steering his highbeast. "Watch out!" he shouted.

White smoke poured from the fresh hole in the side of the Lanzenavian ship. I wanted to take a closer look, but the risk was too great; maybe those on board would attack us with the silver needles Hannelore had mentioned.

Ferdinand took a moment to see how far the moving ships were from the country gate, then stopped just far enough from the stalled vessel that we wouldn't need to worry about a volley of silver. "Rozemyne, enhance your vision and give me a report," he said.

I glanced over my shoulder at him and nodded. For him to have entrusted such an important job to me, he must not have been capable of doing it himself. Was that why he'd ordered me to ride with him? To keep the others from finding out how little he'd recovered, he needed someone with enhanced vision to keep him abreast of the situation—to give him enough information that he could accurately instruct the knights.

He can't rest because we're not reliable enough on our own.

I'd managed to dye Ahrensbach's foundation, but the duchy's nobles were all strangers to me; they wouldn't have thrown their weight behind me no matter how much they wanted to defeat Lanzenave. They were only helping us now because Ferdinand was

instructing them, so supporting him was the least I could do. I enhanced my vision and squinted to see past the smoke.

"Someone dressed in silver just stepped out of the hole," I said. "A man, from what I can tell."

"Is he Lanzenavian or Dunkelfelgerian?" Ferdinand asked.

The man climbed atop the sleek vessel and cautiously looked around. As I leaned forward, waiting to see what he would do, he threw off his silver clothes and shot mana up into the air.

"That's a schtappe!" I cried. "He must be from Dunkelfelger!"

"Lord Ferdinand!" Heissshitze exclaimed at almost the same moment. "The ship must have been fully subjugated!"

The knights had a system in place: they would shoot rotts into the sky when they needed aid and raw mana when their operation was a success. The earlier explosion had been caused by the Dunkelfelgerians infiltrating the ship.

As our knights let out roars of approval, an ordonnanz arrived. "The ship has been subjugated," it announced, exactly as Heissshitze had predicted. "We will now begin freeing the hostages. Their highbeast feystones were confiscated, so the rescue might take a while."

"Right." Ferdinand squeezed the reins of his highbeast, and the lion flapped its wings. "Squad Six, help free the hostages and retrieve their feystones. Squads Seven and Eight, attack the ship closest to the gate. Squads Nine and Ten, attack the ship behind it."

"Yes, sir!"

We raced toward the border gate, taking care to manage our speed so that we wouldn't catch up with the fleeing vessels. The sky brightened, illuminating the waters below.

"Rozemyne, when the ships start changing color, I need you to grant them the aub's protection," Ferdinand said. "Do you have enough mana?"

"Enough to use the spell two more times. Anything more is beyond me." I wasn't going to lie or overestimate my mana—not when it risked jeopardizing our plans. "I drank a rejuvenation potion when teleporting between the country gates, then another while dyeing the foundation. Drinking any more will render me too sick to move, so I won't do that until it's safe for me to sleep."

"I am glad to see you understand what you can tolerate. That said..." Ferdinand paused. "Two more times, hm...?"

As he fell into thought, a sense of unease spread through my

chest. "Is there a problem?"

"As they move between countries, Lanzenave's ships change from mana-deflecting silver to mana-absorbing black. The reason has yet to be ascertained, but the knights stationed at the border gate believe the vessels need to be filled with the country gate's mana before they can teleport. If black plating truly is as absorptive as black feystones, then your protection spell might require even more mana than the one you just performed."

Ferdinand understood that casting the aub's protection required a considerable amount of mana, but because he'd never actually been an archduke, he couldn't accurately determine how much of a burden it would place on me. The power of the spell depended on how much mana one put into one's schtappe and varied from person to person.

"Furthermore," he continued, "unless the Lanzenavians are extraordinarily foolish, they will not have both ships change color together. One will stay back and observe until the other has successfully made it through both gates. If we obliterate the first ship the moment it turns black, the second will remain silver. It will not be able to teleport, and we will not be able to damage it, leaving us at a stalemate. The pertinent question is how we can quickly and safely rescue the hostages in spite of your flagging mana..."

If not for the hostages, we could simply have dropped massive boulders on the ship as that one knight had suggested. Ferdinand was right, though: given his health and the situation back in Ehrenfest, we needed a quick solution.

"Rozemyne, can you think of a way to destroy the ships without expending much mana or harming the hostages?" Ferdinand said. He then brought his lips to my ear and whispered, "I ask not only because you have the Book of Mestionora but also because you have experience of a world without mana. Just making their silver plating vulnerable would do."

I appreciated the need for secrecy, but his breath tickled my ear and sent a shiver down my spine. This was why sound-blockers existed, surely.

"Do you have any ideas?" he asked.

"There might not have been any mana in my world, but science can develop in all sorts of ways. I won't be able to come up with any solutions without first understanding Lanzenave's

technologies.”

“Try nonetheless. I will inform you when it is time to grant the aub’s protection.”

I examined the silver ships, trying to think of a way to solve our problem without mana.

What is that silver material, anyway? The metallic sheen rules out cloth. Maybe it’s just paint. If so, my only ideas right now are peeling it away or trying to weaken the metal enough that physical attacks go through it.

Hmm... We could try melting the paint. How would we generate enough heat, though? And wouldn’t we cook the hostages alive in the process? Ehh...

“Once the aub’s protection has been applied, attack the nearest ship with all your might,” Ferdinand said. He was sending an ordonnanz to the knights at the gate. “Show no restraint; we cannot allow the Lanzenavians to return home. We shall rescue the hostages once the ship has been obliterated.”

A moment later, Ferdinand spoke again: “The ship closest to the border gate is changing color. Rozemyne, the spell. Squad Seven, Squad Eight, those stationed at the gate—prepare to attack!”

I saw then that the ship’s exterior comprised numerous tiles. One by one, they moved outward and then flipped, turning the vessel from silver to black. I created my schtappe and channeled mana into it; for the sake of preserving my mana, this had to be the best time to strike.

“Vollkowesen!”

I swung my schtappe, sending forth a sizable yellow bird. Perhaps because I was focusing the aub’s protection on a smaller area this time, it flew straight toward the ship instead of circling around it.

“Now!” Ferdinand ordered.

Ahrensbach knights deployed from the roof of the duchy’s border gate. They and their Dunkelfelger allies wielded schtappe swords that shone with increasingly complex colors as they descended on their Lanzenavian foes.

Ferdinand cut the air with his schtappe and shot a slender beam of mana that reminded me of a rott toward the ship below. Then, right on cue, the knights collectively swung their swords and unleashed their mana with loud roars. It twisted and contorted in the air until it was rainbow-colored, then crashed into the now fully

black vessel.

The radiant ball of mana struck the ship with a *boom* so loud that my ears started to ring. Columns of white water leapt up from the ocean, swallowing the vessel whole before scattering chunks of its exterior all over the place.

“The hostages are safe! Beginning rescue operations!”

“Hurry! Secure them while they are still under the aub’s protection!”

I could see women floating on the ocean, enveloped in a protective light. They stared up at the sky in utter confusion as Dunkelfelger knights bound them with schtappes, fished them out of the water, and then carried them to the border gate. In the meantime, Ahrensbach knights wove light into massive nets which they then dragged through the waves to catch what remained: scattered magic tools and a few very bewildered noblewomen.

“EEK!” came a cry from the net.

One of the women was stuck in what could only be described as a wrestling match with a fish that must have been killed by the shock wave. My heart went out to her, but she would need to endure until our rescue operation was complete.

A surprising number of Lanzenavian soldiers had survived the explosion—no doubt thanks to their silver clothes that protected them from mana—and were now floundering in the ocean. They desperately swiped at the schtappe-made nets trawling the water, hoping to be saved, but the light went right through them. The most they could do was flail their arms around.

“Ferdinand, what will we do about the Lanzenavians?” I asked. “Should we capture them for their testimonies?”

“We already have two ships’ worth of Lanzenavians; we do not need any more,” Ferdinand said tersely before heading toward the other ship. It had almost been consumed by the massive waves made by the explosion but was now just rocking back and forth.

The ship was still silver. It wasn’t continuing toward the gates, nor was it heading back to the port. Just as Ferdinand had predicted, we were at a stalemate.

“Hm?”

A portion of the sleek submarine-like vessel opened, and out came a silver box covered with tiny holes.

“What is that?” Ferdinand murmured.

“Lanzenave’s volley weapon!” Heisschitze shouted. “The one that

shoots needles!”

As expected, long-range mana attacks did nothing to the box. The knights’ magic tools were equally as useless. We had prepared countermeasures for Lanzenave’s silver cloth but not for its silver battleships. To be honest, I was frustrated about my own lack of foresight.

“They’re attacking!” one knight shouted.

“Keep your distance!” cried another as the ship fired indiscriminately into the air. Its needles were dangerous enough that we couldn’t risk a careless approach.

“This must be because they saw us destroy the other vessel...” Ferdinand mused. “Their partner was reduced to scraps, and now it is abundantly clear that they will not be able to pass through the country gate and return to Lanzenave. They should also have realized that returning to the port will only see them captured. I suspect they have descended into a state of sheer panic.”

Now I was *really* worried about the hostages. We needed to save them as soon as possible. There had to be a way to remove the silver from the vessel, like scratching away the paint. Or maybe we could jam knives into the gaps between the tiles and force them to turn over.

“If only we could seal those openings they’re using to attack us...” I said.

“Mana does not seem to work on them. Do you have any other ideas?”

I took a moment to consider my options as an aub. “Those dressed in silver still can’t pass through ivory walls or floors, right? Perhaps we could cover the openings with an *entwickeln*.”

Ferdinand shook his head and replied in an openly exasperated voice, “You come out with the most bizarre suggestions.”

“Hm? Would it not work?”

“Do you need to ask? You act as if sealing the openings would be simple, but who would measure them? Moreover, how do you intend to draw the schematics? We do not have the fey paper or ink necessary for an *entwickeln*, nor do we have the gold dust. You also seem to be forgetting what a tremendous amount of mana it would require.”

You’d normally be right, Ferdinand... but not this time.

“If we find a way to obtain those measurements, I think we can make this work,” I said. “Clarissa made so much spare fey paper

that we were able to bring some with us, and we can use stylo in place of traditional ink, right? As for the gold dust, well... I just so happen to have some with me!”

I took out my necklace marked with the royal crest and indicated the parts of the chain that had started to crumble. We wouldn’t be able to get much gold dust from them, but I was sure it would do; our plan was to cover the vessel, not create an entire building.

“Well, Ferdinand...? Is this enough gold dust?”

“No, not even for a small cover. And destroying any more of the necklace is not an option; it would be far too disrespectful to the royal family. If you desire gold dust, I shall give you feystones to destroy.”

I couldn’t accept that alternative. Ferdinand was carrying high-capacity feystones, and there was no way I’d manage to turn them to dust when I was already so drained.

“The chain of my necklace is thoroughly saturated with mana,” I said. “It won’t take much more to turn it into dust. Perhaps I could make up for the damage by making an offering of some kind when I return it. I doubt the royals would consider a trinket in this state more important than human lives...”

“These hostages are nobles of a duchy that has started a rebellion; I sincerely doubt the royal family will value their lives as much as you do. And as we do not know how the royals will respond, we should avoid creating any unnecessary weaknesses that might be exploited. Besides, even if we *do* secure the gold dust we need, performing the *entwickeln* would require you to fly within range of Lanzenave’s weapons. Not a single one of your guard knights would permit it.”

There wasn’t much I could say to that, especially considering my current predicament. If an *entwickeln* was out of the question, then I would just need to come up with something else.

“Could we freeze the ship? That box won’t be able to shoot us if we cover it with ice.”

“A fine idea, but how do you intend to realize it?”

“Ngh... I *would* propose making Ewigeliebe’s sword, but it only works during the winter.”

It was already spring—and with how hot it was here in Ahrensbach, one could easily have assumed it was summer. Spring Prayer hadn’t yet finished, so Flutrane’s divine protection *was* still

weak, but that didn't mean we could use Ewigeliebe's sword.

"I fail to see the problem," Ferdinand said. "Could we not just make it winter?"

"Excuse me?"

"If we modify the circle that summons spring in Haldenzel, I imagine we can make one that summons winter."

"Are you serious? How can you say that like it's the most obvious thing in the world...?"

Modifying such a large circle was practically unheard of. Few would even think to attempt it. Well, it hadn't crossed *my* mind, at least—maybe because I didn't have a knack for improving magic circles.

"That said, even if we transform only the area around the vessel, activating the circle will not be easy. Do you have any feystones we could use instead of expending the rest of your mana?"

"I've got some filled with the mana I drained from Ahrensbach's foundation before dyeing it myself."

"Pray tell, *why* do you have those on you?"

In truth, I'd simply forgotten about them, but Ferdinand wouldn't be able to figure that out on his own.

"And you also have fey paper, correct?" he asked.

"Correct. More than enough." I reached into a pouch and pulled out several folded sheets.

"Your eccentricity never ceases to amaze me..." Ferdinand replied, sounding exhausted for some reason. "In any case, if we succeed in summoning winter, who will use Ewigeliebe's sword? I would rather it not be one of us, since we will need our mana to close the border and country gates."

I turned to my knights and proudly stuck out my chest; they hadn't spent so much time in the temple for nothing. "In part because they competed to see who could create the divine instruments the fastest, every single one of my knights can use the sword. That includes Damuel. Amazing, aren't they?"

Ferdinand stared at my knights for a moment, then started rubbing his forehead. "Aberrance only begets more aberrance..."

Aren't you the king of aberrance, Mr. Let's Summon Winter?

Summoning Winter

Several questions later, Ferdinand gathered the knights of Squads Nine and Ten, then informed them of our idea.

“You plan to *freeze the ship*?!” Heissshitze exclaimed. “Does this mean you can wield Schneeahst the God of Ice’s power even during this warm weather infused with Flutrane’s might?!”

“I shall perform a ritual to make it winter around the ship.”

“Excuse me?”

That’s exactly what I said. The very idea makes you think, “What the heck is this guy on about?” Right? He’s the abnormal one, not me.

Ferdinand didn’t waste another moment on Heissshitze or the very confused members of Squads Nine and Ten. Instead, he turned to my knights and instructed them to wield Ewigeliebe’s sword. Cornelius, Matthias, Leonore, and Angelica all stared at him in shock before exchanging looks.

“Lord Ferdinand, we cannot *all* perform the ceremony...” Cornelius said. “Using the sword drains one of one’s mana, and we cannot leave Lady Rozemyne without her guard knights.”

Leonore nodded in agreement, eager to decline such a nonsense suggestion. “Our highbeasts would surely vanish in the process. And without anyone to retrieve us, we would drop straight into the ocean.”

“There is no guarantee that a single knight’s mana would allow us to freeze the vessel,” Ferdinand shot back. “The more people we have wielding Ewigeliebe’s sword, the better. Especially if they have an abundance of mana. That said, it *is* true that Rozemyne needs guard knights.”

Matthias looked toward the port. “Laurenz can also use Ewigeliebe’s sword. Might I suggest entrusting the magic tools to someone else so that we can bring him here?”

“An excellent idea,” Ferdinand replied with a nod. He then gazed landward, fixing his eyes not on the outer wall but on the castle beyond it. “Rozemyne. If your guard knights were able to obtain Ewigeliebe’s sword by offering mana at the temple, can the

same be said for Hartmut?”

“Of course. He and Cornelius competed to see who could make it first. But, wait... You aren’t suggesting we *include him*, are you?!”

“Hartmut is a scholar able to use Ewigeliebe’s sword; if you wish to keep some of your guard knights, who better to ask?” Ferdinand gave me an ordonnanz feystone, a wry smile on his face, and said, “Summon him. He will arrive in mere moments.”

I nodded and created the bird. “Hartmut, we are about to perform a large-scale ritual so that we can use Ewigeliebe’s sword. We need your support as our High Priest. I must ask that you put on feystone armor and make your way here at once.”

Ferdinand then took my hand and added to the message: “I would recommend asking Clarissa to manage the magic tools and rejuvenation potions atop the outer walls. You may bring the Ahrensbach nobles along so that they might witness a true ritual. Hurry.”

Hartmut’s response came almost immediately. “Understood, Lady Rozemyne. I shall carry out your will at once.”

“Hop to it, everyone!” Clarissa announced in the background. “This is a fantastic opportunity to burn the resplendent form of Lady Rozemyne into your eyes and see within her the image of a goddess!”

They both sounded fairly lively. Clarissa hadn’t been allowed to visit the temple, meaning she couldn’t make the divine instruments. There hadn’t been anything we could do about that, but it had still frustrated her, so I was glad to know she finally had a role to play.

If only that role weren’t brainwashing nobles!

Even now, I couldn’t help finding Hartmut and Clarissa’s enthusiasm somewhat... *repulsive*. As I chewed on that thought, Ferdinand sent an ordonnanz to Laurenz.

“Laurenz, we are calling on Rozemyne’s guards to wield Ewigeliebe’s sword. Choose four apprentice knights to join you; they will need to retrieve you and provide rejuvenation potions once you have expended your mana. Clarissa has agreed to manage the magic tools in your place.”

“I shall speed through the selection process and, if permitted, unite with you once Clarissa has taken over my role,” Laurenz replied. I could tell there were some burning questions on the tip of his tongue, but the most I could do was silently cheer him on.

“Cornelius, I entrust you to choose which of Rozemyne’s guard

knights will participate in the ritual,” Ferdinand said. “Two of you will need to sit on your hands. Given the qualities of Ewigeliebe’s sword, I would recommend excluding women.”

“Understood.”

As my knights spoke among themselves, Heissshitze looked around in shock, still not convinced. He wasn’t the only one; the Dunkelfelger knights were collectively stunned.

At last, Heissshitze erupted. “How can you all from Ehrenfest remain so at ease?! Am I the only one who heard Lord Ferdinand say that he plans to *summon winter*?!” He directed these questions at Angelica, of all people, since she was just observing the conversation from a distance.

She blinked in surprise, then placed a hand on her cheek and gave him a wistful smile. “We don’t need to understand the arduous duties thrust upon us; instead, we need only figure out how to accomplish them. Right now, we are expected to either swing Ewigeliebe’s sword or guard Lady Rozemyne. The summoning of winter is not my concern.”

“I see... *Regimentation* allows you to stay calm...”

Angelica’s attitude pretty much boils down to “I don’t like thinking about complicated things and would rather just focus on what I do best.” But wow, she sure made it seem profound.

Moved and inspired, Heissshitze promptly shouted, “Lord Ferdinand, assign us jobs too!”

Of course, Ferdinand paid the plea no mind. He sent an ordonnanz to the knight from before asking how much longer it would take him to rescue those previously thrown into the sea.

“Lord Ferdinand, this is Strahl,” came the response. “We have finished rescuing the kidnapped women and are now searching for any remaining feystones and magic tools. We would... like to retrieve as many of our late comrades’ feystones as we can.”

“I see. We are about to summon winter to freeze the other vessel, which will cause the temperature of the surrounding ocean to fall. Be careful.”

“Uh...”

The knight replied only with a grunt of surprise. Ferdinand must have interpreted it as a gesture of acknowledgment, as he chose not to elaborate. I couldn’t help feeling bad for this Strahl guy.

“Ferdinand, who was that?” I asked.

“He was Ahrensbach’s knight commander before Detlinde relieved him of duty. Now he is my guard knight.”

Ferdinand then sent an ordonnanz asking to speak with the Dunkelfelger knights who had infiltrated the ship and conquered it from within. It returned with a few words of acknowledgment before he sent it along to Hannelore’s squadron, requesting an update on their situation. The little bird sure was busy today.

As it turned out, Hannelore’s group had more or less finished conquering their ship as well. The kidnapped women were being led outside and an inquiry into the damages was underway.

“Rozemyne—stretch your arms out in front of you, place them on the head of my highbeast, and then lean forward,” Ferdinand said.

“What’s this all of a sudden?”

I was confused, but I did as instructed nonetheless. Ferdinand told me to stay still and placed a heavy board of some kind on my back. He hadn’t been carrying it before, so he must have transformed a feystone.

“Staying like this is actually really tough...” I groaned. “What exactly are you doing?”

“You need only wait for me to finish drawing the magic circle.”

No waaaay! I’m being used as a desk?!

As unfortunate as it was, there wasn’t much I could do but wait for Ferdinand to finish drawing on the sheet of paper I’d given him.

“Ferdinand, my arms are starting to waver.”

“Already? You really should exercise more.”

Trying not to think about my trembling arms, I decided to strike up a conversation. “The sturdiness of mana-made metal depends on the mana capacity of whoever created it, right? Well, the metals that commoners use tend to become brittle when exposed to extreme cold. Do you think Lanzenave’s manaless metal might become more susceptible to physical attacks once the ship is frozen?”

“Oh? We could easily instruct the Dunkelfelger knights to attack,” Ferdinand said, continuing to draw all the while. “But what approach would work best?”

“Umm... Metal tends to contract when exposed to a rapid drop in temperature. If we could jam spears or swords into the gaps between the black and silver tiles, I assume we’d manage to pry them off.”

And once a few of the tiles were gone, removing the rest would be easy.

“Those attack ports are the only thing stopping us from landing on the deck and forcing our way into the vessel,” Ferdinand said. “Imagine how much easier this operation will be once they are gone. We have plenty of knights renowned for their strength here with us, but if we are going to bring about winter, then smashing the metal sounds best. Our overall aim is to remove the silver so that you can use the aub’s protection again. Creating a hole large enough for a single person should allow Dunkelfelger’s knights to infiltrate with magic tools and start rescuing the hostages.”

We had the flash-bangs, the noisemakers, and those tear-gas grenades that Hartmut had provided. With so many options available to us, conquering the ship would be easy once the hostages had the aub’s protection.

Again we consulted Hannelore’s squadron and the knights who had infiltrated the other ship. This time, we learned that the prisoners were being kept in rooms that resisted mana.

“Heisshitze, once the ship is frozen, gather your best knights and rain spears on the areas away from those rooms.”

“You may count on us!”

By the time Ferdinand was done with the magic circle, we had reunited with Hartmut, Laurenz, and the retrieval squad. The flurry of ordonnanzes relaying instructions and delivering fresh intelligence must have drawn the attention of Ahrensbach’s nobles, as I could see various highbeasts around the outer walls. Even the commoners had thrown up their windows to watch.

Still waiting high above the ship, I gazed across my guard knights and the apprentices with them. It had been decided that Cornelius, Matthias, Laurenz, and Hartmut would swing Ewigeliebe’s sword.



“Rozemyne, begin,” Ferdinand said just as the sun poked up over the horizon. The sky brightened all at once, and the crashing waves began to sparkle.

Using the feystones he handed me, I traced the design on the fey paper, slowly filling it with mana. The first three feystones ran out, then the fourth. I was starting to worry that we wouldn’t have enough, but the magic circle activated right as I placed the fifth stone down.

The fey paper floated into the air, then caught fire and shot up toward the sky. Its magic circle turned red; then a beam of the same radiant hue descended on the ship. It was large enough to completely envelop it.

Just as the surrounding knights let out cries of awe, the red magic circle began changing color. Piercing white light replaced the red, consuming it from the top down.

“Winter has come. Do it.”

“Okay!”

Ferdinand flew his highbeast into the column of white. The drop in temperature was immediately noticeable, but my retainers were unfazed thanks to their feystone armor. They drew their respective swords of Ewigeliebe with nary a pause.

The white blades were enveloped in chilly ice the moment they were drawn. My retainers channeled more and more mana into them, causing the swirling snow to thicken into a blizzard.

“O God of Life Ewigeliebe, ruler of restoration and death. O twelve gods who serve by his side...” the four chanted.

As the harsh winds raged, I shivered and rubbed my arms. Ferdinand must have noticed, as he removed his cape and wrapped it around me. It was nice to have some protection from the ice slurry sweeping through the air.

“I thank you ever so much,” I said.

“There is no need for that; it is my fault you do not have warm clothes to begin with. An attendant would have prepared some for you without the slightest hesitation. I should have brought Justus...”

I gazed down at the cloak wrapped around me. As glad as I was to see Ferdinand reflecting on his mistake, was this really the time? The magic circles on his cape had started shining the instant it

touched me, which must have been making us stand out.

Maybe it isn't too noticeable now that the sun's out. Or maybe we're just too far away. Hmm...

I wasn't about to return the cape when it was so bitterly cold, but the thought that people were staring at me was a little embarrassing.

"I give to thee mine unwavering faith," my four retainers continued. "Let my foremost ideals be met with praise and granted your protection. Grant me thy divine power so that no enemies might approach."

Their chant finished, my retainers swung their swords down at the ship. The ice and snow twisted and transformed into the Lord of Winter's spawn, which then descended on the ship. At a guess, there had to be at least seventy of them.

Ewigeliebe's swords then disappeared, having merely been transformed schtappes, and the four who had wielded them all slumped over. The apprentices riding with them sprang into action, flying their charges out of the white pillar to give them rejuvenation potions.

I enhanced my vision and watched as the ice spawn gnawed on the ship below. Crystals of snow formed over the openings of the volley weapons, turning them from silver to white. My four retainers must have had an overwhelming amount of mana, for in mere moments, the entire vessel was buried in ice and snow. Even the water within the pillar froze over.

"Rozemyne, how many winter subordinates remain?" Ferdinand asked.

"Three more, from what I can tell." They were fading away one by one.

"Heisshitze! Go!"

"DESCEND!" Heisshitze shouted in response.

At once, four Dunkelfelger knights flew into the pillar, formed their schtappes, and simultaneously shouted, "*Lanze!*" Crackling spears appeared in their hands.

"Are those... *Leidenschaft's* spears?" Ferdinand muttered.

"Do you remember when Aub Dunkelfelger presented his temple's spear during my third-year Interduchy Tournament? Well, since then, the duchy's knights have been using *Leidenschaft's* spear in their pre-ditter rituals. Your information network really suffered as a result of Ahrensbach not participating in the Royal Academy's

ceremonies, huh?”

“Yes, that is becoming all too clear to me.”

The blue-cape rushed down to the frozen ship, their crackling spears in hand.

“HYAAAAAAH!”

With an intense roar, Heisshitze threw his spear alongside his four knights. The silver plating might have been immune to mana, but it didn’t stand a chance against Leidenschaft’s heat. The ice surrounding the ship was blown away, as was a portion of the silver tiles.

One of the thrown spears had managed to slot into an opening made by the contracting metal. Blue mana spread out like a web, causing more and more tiles to come away—and it was then that Ferdinand gave the order.

“Rozemyne! The aub’s protection! Now!”

I channeled mana into my schtappe, then swung it and chanted, “*Vollkowesen!*” A yellow bird flew into the ship to protect Ahrensbach’s citizens.

“Eckhart! Make an opening in the bow!” Ferdinand said. He had started instructing the others without even waiting for me to finish.

“Yes, my lord!”

“Squads Nine and Ten, prepare to infiltrate!”

“Understood!”

Eckhart morphed his schtappe into a sword and started filling it with mana as he headed toward the ship. He was moving so fast that one might have thought he was chasing after the bird. The ship was no longer a threat now that its silver tiles had been removed; Eckhart’s rainbow blade slashed into it and made a gaping hole for the Dunkelfelger knights to fly through.

I drew a magic circle with my stylo as instructed; then Ferdinand tossed three feystones into it. The column of white disappeared, marking the end of winter. It was fairly surreal to see the frozen ship floating on ice amid what was essentially summer heat and a dazzling sun.

“Ferdinand, they rescued Lady Letizia,” I said when I saw the golden-haired little girl being brought out of the ship. She had grown a little but looked mostly the same, so I recognized her instantly.

Ferdinand exhaled while putting on the cape I’d returned to him. “Rozemyne, how do you wish to treat her?”

“Wha...?”

“Will she be treated as family to the traitors, an attempted murderer, or the victim of a conniving scheme? Your decision will dictate whether we capture her here as a criminal or treat her as another victim—though in either case, she will need to be kept under surveillance.”

I turned from Letizia, who was now on the deck, to Ferdinand. “I shall treat her with forgiveness and generosity. You knew she didn’t have any ill intentions, didn’t you? I doubt you would have entrusted her with your retainers’ name stones otherwise.”

“Very well. We can always charge her for her crimes if we need to. But for now, let us treat her as a victim.”

Choices

Letizia was standing on the ship with four women who appeared to be her retainers. Ferdinand brought his highbeast down beside them.

“Lady Letizia... I am glad to see you well,” I said. “You aren’t hurt, are you?”

I dismounted the lion and went to approach her, but Angelica and Leonore, who had also descended to serve as my knights, held out their hands to stop me. Evidently, I wasn’t allowed any closer.

“Is that you, Lady Rozemyne...?” Letizia asked, blinking. She hadn’t recognized me at first because of my sudden growth spurt. “Dunkelfelger’s knights informed me of your rescue operations. They said you stole Ahrensbach’s foundation to save Lord Ferdinand and smote Lanzenave. I do not even know where to begin. It is all my—”

“Lady Letizia,” Ferdinand interjected.

The girl stared up at him in utter shock. Her expression betrayed her relief, and the tension started draining from her body. “So you are safe, Lord Ferdinand... When Lady Detlinde told me you had died, I was so—”

“I am only here now because you were able to reach Eckhart and Justus,” Ferdinand said. He was wearing a smile, but the intensity in his eyes made it clear that he was telling her to shut up.

Letizia must have noticed, as she immediately fell silent.

“Rozemyne, who is now Aub Ahrensbach, knows everything about the incident,” Ferdinand continued. “Nonetheless, she made the decision to rescue you.”

Letizia’s surprise was once again directed at me. Her retainers wore the same look of astonishment. They must not have expected me to help the person who struck the first blow against Ferdinand. Or maybe they were just surprised that someone who had stolen a foundation was now showing compassion to a member of the previous archducal family.

“But, Lord Ferdinand, I... I...”

“Say nothing of the matter until we are somewhere private,” Ferdinand replied. “In fact, act as though nothing happened at all. Can I assume you will obey me this time?”

Letizia looked up at him, her face pale. Then she brought a trembling hand to her chest, squeezed it into a tight fist, and nodded. “I will. From the bottom of my heart, I am grateful for your and Lady Rozemyne’s consideration.”

“We intend to close the gates so that no more Lanzenavian ships enter,” Ferdinand continued. “Lady Letizia, return to the castle under guard and instruct your attendants to prepare somewhere in the grand hall for Dunkelfelger’s knights to rest.”

“Ferdinand, we *just* rescued Lady Letizia from imprisonment,” I said, unable to believe he was ordering her around already. “She needs to rest before you—”

“She has spent her time sitting still inside a ship. Should she not have more stamina than someone who was poisoned and a young woman who recently dyed a foundation and expelled the Lanzenavian invaders?”

“You may be right in that regard, but please consider the emotional side of things.”

Ferdinand sneered at the very idea. Then, looking down at Letizia, he explained our situation. To restore some order to Ahrensbach’s disarrayed nobles, she needed to announce in her capacity as an archducal family member that she had been rescued by Dunkelfelger and me, and that the danger of Lanzenave had passed.

The nobles are far more likely to believe her than they are any of us.

Seeing a young woman like Letizia working hard despite the great mental strain she was under would also do wonders to earn her the people’s sympathy. For the sake of her future, she would need as much support as she could get. At the same time, it would give Ahrensbach’s nobles hope; if Letizia had been spared, perhaps they would be too. The adults would surely be motivated to work just as hard.

“Furthermore,” Ferdinand continued, “unless one is particularly empty-headed and overoptimistic, doing nothing in an emergency situation should prove far more stressful than leaping into action to support those who need it.”

As if on cue, Letizia stepped forward and knelt before me.

“Lady Rozemyne, it is as Lord Ferdinand says; I would much rather provide my assistance. I cannot bear the thought of doing nothing.”

“I see... In that case, please prepare somewhere for everyone to rest.”

“At once. Roswitha—”

Upon returning to her feet, Letizia had moved to address someone, only to pause mid-turn with a vacant look on her face. Another young woman—an apprentice, I assumed, since she wasn’t wearing her hair up—stepped forward and placed a hand on her charge’s shoulder.

“I will summon the attendants, Lady Letizia.”

“Fairseele...”

Their brief exchange and the pain in their eyes were enough for me to guess what was wrong. Something had happened to one of Letizia’s attendants—a woman by the name of Roswitha.

“Leonore, instruct the Dunkelfelger knights to take Lady Letizia and her retinue to the castle,” I said. “They are to ensure that she arrives there safely.”

Leonore nodded and went to carry out my order with great haste. Meanwhile, the girl named Fairseele turned to Ferdinand.

“Um, Lord Ferdinand... May I ask one question?”

“You may.”

“Did my father protect Ahrensbach’s nobles?” she asked, her hands clasped and trembling.

I reflexively looked up at Ferdinand. Fairseele’s concern about her father mirrored my own worries about Dad trying to protect Ehrenfest.

“Based on the reports I received—short though they might have been—it seems fair to say that Strahl minimized casualties as much as anyone could have,” Ferdinand replied. “He is currently rescuing others by the border gate.”

Tears welled up in Fairseele’s eyes as she said, “Thank you.” She took a moment to kneel, then returned to Letizia and the others who were about to leave with a group of Dunkelfelger’s knights.

As I watched them go, Ferdinand went straight over to the knights tasked with retrieving feystones and magic tools from the ship. “Heisshitze, have the knights remove the Lanzenavian soldiers’ silver clothes,” he said. “They will prove most useful for the upcoming battles in Ehrenfest and the Sovereignty.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Eckhart, work with them. Do not forget to retrieve the feystones.” Ferdinand then gave Eckhart a sound-blocker and said something I naturally couldn’t hear. It must have been an order, considering that Eckhart responded with a serious nod.

Once he’d given out his instructions and concluded an ordonnanz conversation with the knights working by the border gate, Ferdinand formed his highbeast and summoned me.

“Rozemyne, we will start by closing the country gate.”

“But I won’t be—”

“Justus informed me that you used the gate to get here. You are the only one who can close it.”

I see. Ferdinand doesn’t want anyone else to know about his Book of Mestionora. Roger.

Indeed, I would need to be there so that Ferdinand could discreetly close the country gate. I climbed onto his highbeast, and we started making our way there. In the ocean below, only a portion of the ship blasted apart by Leidenschaft’s spears was still covered with frost, and the thick ice that had surrounded it was now just a bunch of shattered clumps. Ahrensbach’s warmth was working fast.

“There are soldiers swimming toward the country gate,” I observed.

“Leave them be,” Ferdinand replied. “Those without the mana to teleport on their own rely on registration feystones to activate the circle. They will end up trapped in their silver clothes or forever trek the white desert on the other side of the gate.”

I hadn’t seen past the gate when we’d arrived in Ahrensbach; it had been the dead of night, and we’d rushed straight toward the city. Now that I was here during the daytime, however, I could see a white desert just like the one by Ehrenfest. The ocean abruptly stopped at the teleportation circle, and everything beyond it was sand. It was like staring at a trompe l’oeil painting or some other kind of optical illusion.

“Rozemyne, did you not close the gate behind you...?”

“I mean... we really didn’t have time...”

The roof of the country gate was still open wide enough for Lessy to fly through. In my defense, I’d arrived racked with tension and fearing an attack from Ahrensbach’s knights; closing the gate hadn’t even crossed my mind.

“Hmm... It saves me the trouble of opening it, I suppose.

Rozemyne, raise your right hand and open your bible so that everyone can see. We are about to enter.”

“Right.”

Ferdinand put his right arm around my waist. Anyone watching us would assume he was just trying to keep me from falling.

“*Grutrissheit!*” I shouted.

Ferdinand said the chant with me, speaking in barely a whisper. His *Grutrissheit* appeared in my lap where nobody else would be able to see it.

Wow, his Book of Mestionora is pretty thick. I wonder if I’m able to read it...

As everyone stared at my *Grutrissheit*, which I was holding as high as I could, Ferdinand plunged into the country gate. Only those who had the Book could enter from above, so Leonore was blocked when she tried to follow us.

“Lady Rozemyne! Lord Ferdinand! Please come back out!” she cried.

Ferdinand dispelled his *Grutrissheit* and highbeast. “Rozemyne, shut the roof. I will not be able to close the gate with an audience.”

I gazed up at Leonore and Angelica as they flew around, then pressed my Book of Mestionora against the gate.

“Allow me to use this opportunity to ask: Rozemyne, what would you like to do next?”

“Well, I wouldn’t mind returning to Ehrenfest and getting some rest...”

“I mean after that,” he said, looking up at the closing roof. “In a single night, you have dyed Ahrensbach’s foundation and purged the Lanzenave threat. You have also used the country’s border gates, which proves you are qualified to become the Zent. These things have given you options.”

As I wavered, Ferdinand started to count them on his fingers. One: I could give Ahrensbach’s foundation to someone else and, as planned, endure a miserable life married into the royal family. Two: I could give Ahrensbach’s foundation to someone else, then rule Yurgenschmidt as the Zent after my adoption. Three: I could give the magic tool *Grutrissheit* to the royal family and then spend my life here as Aub Ahrensbach. Four: I could give the magic tool *Grutrissheit* to the royal family and Ahrensbach’s foundation to someone else, then return to Ehrenfest for the rest of my days.

“There is more nuance than that, of course, but those are your

choices. I must ask that you make your decision before I finish closing the gate; our next move will depend on the path you wish to take.” Ferdinand checked that the roof was fully shut, then gave me a poisonous smile. “As I recall, on the day of my departure for Ahrensbach, you said you would never allow me to spend my life in misery.”

“Th-That’s right.”

“Then I suspect you would never choose such a nightmarish marriage. Not when you have other options.”

He was using my own words against me, and with the most serious expression I’d seen yet. “You’re absolutely correct” was the only response I could give—and with that, my first option was removed from the equation.

“Good. Now, as for your second option... For you to rule Yurgenschmidt, either I would need to die so that you could complete your Grutrissheit, or you would need to be registered as a royal and obtain the magic tool Grutrissheit from the underground archive. The problem, however, is that you are not at all suited to the role—not when you would readily destroy the country for the sake of those you care about. If you choose to become the Zent nonetheless, know that I will do everything I can to stop you. To choose your second option is to choose my death.”

“I don’t want to rule Yurgenschmidt in the first place!” I shouted. The very idea was terrifying.

“As expected.”

Now that Ferdinand was safe, keeping Yurgenschmidt from collapsing had returned to my list of priorities. That didn’t mean I wanted to become the Zent—though it *was* true that the country needed a Book of Mestionora or a Grutrissheit to survive.

“Ngh... Ferdinand, could we not find a way for *you* to become the Zent...? I’m not the only one with a Book of Mestionora.”

“Are you asking me to kill you?” Ferdinand replied, his sharp eyes piercing through me.

I frantically shook my head. Against someone like Ferdinand, I wouldn’t stand a chance; he would end my life quickly and without ever opposing me directly.

“No, no, no!” I said. “I meant that, instead of the royals, I could give *you* the Grutrissheit after my adoption.”

“That might be feasible, but do you *want* me to rule?” he asked, staring at me intently.

I contemplated the question. As far as I was concerned, Ferdinand would make for an excellent Zent—but then I remembered that he had mentioned not wanting the role.

“No,” I declared. “I want you to retire and spend the rest of your days in Ehrenfest, living in peace.”

“Tsk. How old do you think I am?”

“Ow! That hurtsh!”

My well-meaning suggestion had earned me a fairly serious pinch on the cheek. This one actually hurt. I rubbed my face, fighting back the tears in my eyes, and decided to try again.

“Um, I mean... I said to you earlier that I can’t return to Ehrenfest right now, remember? That leaves only a single option...”

I would need to keep being Aub Ahrensbach.

To be honest, I wasn’t at all pleased about the idea. Raimund, Letizia, Sergius, and many others had shown me that not everyone in Ahrensbach was horrible, but my experiences with the duchy had been anything but positive.

It had all started during my days as an apprentice shrine maiden, when Count Bindewald targeted me for my mana. My altercation with him had resulted in my separation from my family.

Of course, the problems had only continued upon my becoming a noble. Georgine and the nobles name-sworn to her had caused plenty of trouble since my adoption—and still were, for that matter. Fraularm had antagonized me to no end at the Royal Academy, and my tea parties with Detlinde had proved both frustrating and torturous.

And then there was our current predicament. Ahrensbach had poisoned and almost killed Ferdinand, even though he’d assiduously helped them with administrative work, religious ceremonies, and even Mana Replenishment since his engagement.

I’d chosen to steal Ahrensbach’s foundation, so I did intend to carry out the bare minimum of the duties expected of me. On the inside, however, I wanted nothing more than to thrust the role on someone else.

“Now then...” Ferdinand said, forming his Book of Mestionora. “You are free to choose any of the four paths I mentioned, but I think we can both agree that the last two have the most appeal. I *did* say that Ahrensbach should be reduced to nothing. It would serve as an ideal playground for you.”

“Playground”?

Playground

“Ferdinand, what on earth do you mean...?”

The frustration and nausea that had eaten away at me mere moments ago was gone, replaced entirely by confusion. For all of our problems with Ahrensbach, I’d never expected him to describe it as a playground.

“Ahrensbach has already committed the grave crime of treason; as the aub, you are free to do with it as you please. You could become its savior or make supposed errors that lead to its destruction.”

“Hold on—wouldn’t *destroying an entire duchy* be an absolute catastrophe?! There are nobles and commoners living here! How can you say something so ridiculous?!”

All of a sudden, I remembered the incident in Hasse. Such an outlandish statement shouldn’t have surprised me; Ferdinand had always been this kind of person. For the crime of attacking an archduke, he had flatly declared that he didn’t care if an entire town of commoners was eradicated.

He really is willing to destroy Ahrensbach.

This wasn’t a cute little act meant to hide his embarrassment about letting Detlinde of all people poison him; I could sense that unless I worked seriously hard to stop him, he really would tear down the entire duchy.

As I put my head in my hands, fearing a repeat of Hasse’s nightmare, Ferdinand gave me a look of disinterest. “You told me long ago that you wanted Ahrensbach, did you not? It has an ocean, for one thing. I recall your envy that the people here could eat fish whenever they wanted. The duchy also boasts several scholars who are trying to derive spices from local plants to minimize trade with Lanzenave, driven by their frustration about the envoys’ recent arrogance. Supporting their research will almost certainly bear fruit.”

What the heck?! Ahrensbach sounds so tasty!

I clapped a hand over my mouth, trying not to drool at the

thought of a seafood paradise. The nightmare hellscape that was Ahrensbach suddenly seemed a whole lot more appealing.

“Furthermore,” Ferdinand continued, “now that you have dyed Ahrensbach’s foundation, the duchy’s land is yours. You can use an entwicklung to create whatever you want—even that library city you proposed during one of our lessons.”

“What? A library city?! Can I actually make one?!”

Back when I’d mentioned the idea to Ferdinand, he’d given me a look of complete exhaustion. And when I’d proposed it during one of my Royal Academy classes, Eglantine had merely humored me as one would a child. Was making a library city actually feasible? If so, it didn’t feel right that Ferdinand was encouraging it.

“Your original plan was to construct it in Ehrenfest, which would not have been possible for the reasons I explained. Ahrensbach, on the other hand, already needs to be restructured so that it can produce new exports and establish new industries.”

My heart had already been racing at the thought of delicious fish and spices, and now I was getting a library city to boot?! The way Ferdinand described it—that whole thing about the duchy needing to be restructured—made it all seem easily within my reach. Ahrensbach now felt like a wonderful land of dreams and whimsy.

Ferdinand continued, “You also mentioned establishing temple schools or something of the sort to raise the literacy rate among commoners. That much should easily be achievable. You would not need anyone’s permission, nor would the Zent be able to interfere; he does not have a say in how duchies are managed. You might even be able to force it through now, considering how much reconstruction is going to be necessary in this time of chaos.”

Temple schools, huh? That was a dream of mine once. Improving the literacy rate, thereby increasing the number of authors...

I was genuinely impressed that Ferdinand seemed to remember the details of every idea I’d thrown at him. More than that, though, I was ready to embrace my future as Aub Ahrensbach.

Or I would have been, had a voice in my head not told me to think. Ferdinand would never be this kind.

That’s right. Something veeery strange is going on here!

I slapped my cheeks a few times, trying to calm down.

Ferdinand paid this no mind and continued with his siren song.

“Those close to you have already begun preparing to move,

have they not? You need only bring them here instead. And as you build institutions accessible to commoners and develop the printing industry with workers of all statuses, you will find it easier than ever to meet with the people you care about. But above all that... the magic contract you signed with your lower-city family applies only to Ehrenfest. It has no power in other duchies.”

“Ferdinand, does that mean...?”

I took a cautious step back. Was he seriously telling me I could reunite with my family? If this was a cruel joke of some kind, I wasn’t sure I’d manage to control my emotions.

“For obvious reasons, if you wish for them to live carefree lives, I would not publicly address them as your family. You could, however, meet them in secret by adding a teleportation circle to their house when you remake the city with an *entwickeln*.”

“Would it really be acceptable for me to place a teleportation circle for such a personal reason?” I asked, surprised that Ferdinand was even suggesting it.

“There is a long history of aubs placing teleportation circles to meet with their lovers, so while it might not be commendable, the option is there for you. Oh, and it should go without saying that you would need to act in moderation. For their safety’s sake.”

I narrowed my eyes in a sharp glare. “Moderation, hmm? Does that mean I won’t be able to see them without your permission?” My caution was feeling more and more justified.

A deep frown creased Ferdinand’s brow. “Is there a reason you leapt to such a twisted conclusion?”

I was more interested to know why he’d asked such a stupid question. He’d said so many twisted things since our arrival at the gate that I would have been crazy *not* to assume the worst.

He continued, “You would be able to spend unfettered, uninterrupted time with your family once or twice per season.”

“Promise?”

“If you allowed me control of your schedule, I would be able to make time for such meetings as necessary. Even Hartmut would be able to arrange one every half year or so.”

By this point, I was ready to stick with my role as Aub Ahrensbach. It had basically everything I wanted. But every sweet deal was sour at its core.

“Nice try, Ferdinand, but you can’t trick me that easily. You’re planning something under the guise of granting my wishes, aren’t

you?”

“You would do well not to bandy about such slanderous remarks.”

“‘Slanderous’? I’m speaking from experience,” I shot back, taking a fighting stance.

Ferdinand eyed me as though I were a petulant child. “Fine,” he said. “As you fear, I am indeed planning something.”

“Aha! See?! Now tell me what you’re scheming! If you try to hide anything from me, I’ll make you regret it!”

Despite his insistence on keeping others in the know, Ferdinand was always hiding things and working in the shadows. He placed a contemplative hand on his cheek and said, “Well, I *would* appreciate a laboratory next to your library. Under the same roof, if possible, so that I could briskly acquire whatever documents I need.”

“Oh, like the feyplant lab you mentioned before?”

“I would also like to research feybeasts and feyfish, but yes, that is mostly correct. You would not mind giving me a small somewhere to indulge my hobbies, would you? Remember that you have an entire duchy to play with.”

So that was what Ferdinand wanted—his very own great laboratory. He really was a mad scientist. I understood where he was coming from, but his request also irritated me.

“You pinched me earlier for saying that you should retire and take it easy! Isn’t this basically the same thing?!”

“There is much I can do here in Ahrensbach that I cannot back in Ehrenfest. As an extension of my lab proper, I would request some isolated areas where I could grow feyplants, raise feybeasts, and keep feyfish taken from the ocean.”

In other words, on top of a lab connected to my library, he wants a botanical garden, a ranch, and an aquarium?

The word “playground” was feeling more appropriate by the minute. Ferdinand wanted me to keep being Aub Ahrensbach so that I could make him his very own research paradise.

“You sure are asking for a lot,” I said.

“Indeed. That is why Sylvester refused to build me a laboratory in Ehrenfest—and why I would rather have one here. I can provide the schematics and the gold dust. The most I need from you is your permission.”

It’s so like him to focus on his own desires at a time like this! He intends to let me wrestle with the duties of an aub while he enjoys a

breezy retirement!

It sounded like a pretty lousy arrangement, if you asked me. Ferdinand would get to hole up in his laboratory while I drowned in too much work to ever be able to visit my library.

“No,” I said. “If I stay here as the aub, you’ll need to help me with my work. I won’t permit you to have fun without me.”

“Is that all?” Ferdinand replied with a grin. “That still sounds much easier than my current role here in Ahrensbach.”

I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was on the back foot, so I scrambled to come up with extra conditions. “Um, umm... There’s more, of course! You’ll need to ensure I can visit my family once per season, develop more palatable rejuvenation potions, and compile the results of any research you perform into books for my library!”

“Hmm... Those requests will require a lot of work and take up a considerable amount of my time, but I consider them reasonable. As long as the duchy funds the binding of the books, I shall get the scholars who use my facilities to submit their results as well.”

“Perfect!” I exclaimed.

Ferdinand gave a slight smile. “Now then—do you have any reasons to oppose staying here as Aub Ahrensbach, or can we proceed with that future in mind?”

“We can proceed,” I said, then punctuated my response with a silent *WOO-HOO!*

“Very good.”

Ferdinand opened up his Book of Mestionora. It looked a lot like the bible given to High Bishops in the temple, which probably explained why he’d called it one when we were outside, but its function wasn’t the same at all. There was no need to search through it, as the page he opened it to already had the magic circle he wanted—a magic circle that was incomplete, I noticed, and therefore wouldn’t activate on its own.

“Rozemyne, this is the magic circle for closing the country gate. It is missing a fragment, as I am sure you can see. I would normally attempt to complete it on my own using the surrounding composition as a guideline, but my mana reserves are too low for me to rely on trial and error. Could you use the knowledge you received to complete the circle for me?”

I quickly formed my own Book of Mestionora and muttered under my breath as I started to search through it. “Closing country gates... Magic circle...” It wasn’t long before I found what I was

looking for. The missing fragment of the magic circle was so small that it would have been incomprehensible on its own.

Ferdinand used a stylo to draw the magic circle in his own Book, consulting mine as he went.

“Can’t you just copy and paste it?” I asked.

“Ah yes, that incomprehensible spell of yours... It does interest me, but let us leave it for another day. We do not have time to spare.”

Ferdinand completed the magic circle and then cast eendgrenze, which caused the circle at his feet to sparkle. The country gate seemed to be activating. Once it was shut, we wouldn’t need to worry about Lanzenave’s ships passing through.

“That did not drain as much of my mana as I expected...” Ferdinand said.

“Oh, that might be because I used the gate earlier. It drained a ton of my mana the first time I teleported and then considerably less the second time.”

Ferdinand dispelled his Book of Mestionora, muttering that supplying the country gates with mana would be urgent business. I put away my Book at the same time.

“Well, Rozemyne... that has solved our most pressing issue, at least.”

To my surprise, Ferdinand then reached a hand out to me. I took it, not quite sure what he wanted, only for him to lead me toward the exit. In an unusual development, it seemed that he intended to escort me.

We made our way downstairs until we were outside the gatepost, then climbed onto Ferdinand’s highbeast and confirmed that the country gate was shut. Before, when both it and the border gate had been wide open, we’d been able to see the teleportation circle and the white desert beyond it. Now, however, an iridescent door stood in the way.

“Lady Rozemyne!”

“Are you safe?!”

I waved at Leonore and Angelica as they flew overhead. “It’s okay! We didn’t see any Lanzenavians!”

“Rozemyne—while we are here, close the border gate as well,” Ferdinand said. “If we can prevent even a single person from passing through, we can consider it a worthwhile move.”

“Got it.”

I formed my schtappe and did as instructed. Ferdinand then took us high up into the air before landing on the roof of one of the gateposts. The noblewomen rescued from the ocean had already been moved to the castle, and the knights tasked with retrieving feystones knelt before us.

“Well done, everyone. You did an even finer job than I expected,” Ferdinand addressed them. “Assign three people to stand watch here while the rest of you break. We shall fetch the knights operating with Georgine.”

“Sir!”

Once they were done, Leonore stepped forward. “Lord Ferdinand, if all that remains is to return to the castle, I must ask that you let Lady Rozemyne ride with me.”

“Certainly. Our battle here is over, and whatever remains of the cleanup can be done later. The sooner she can rest, the better.” Ferdinand gave me a gentle push, urging me toward my retainer. “Rozemyne, go to the room prepared by Letizia and stay in your highbeast. That is the safest place for you right now.”

He was right that I needed to be careful—we didn’t know how much we could trust Ahrensbach’s nobles—but he was completely disregarding his own safety. If anyone needed some time to recover, surely it was the man who had very recently been poisoned.

“Ferdinand, what will you do while I’m resting?” I asked.

“I shall retire to my hidden room. Leonore, Rozemyne is fairly exhausted from expending too much mana. Please instruct Hartmut to give her twice the usual dosage of an undiluted potion.”

Leonore nodded, but the blood drained from my face. “*T-Twice* the usual dosage...?” I stammered.

“Your body has grown, so you will need to drink more. Is that much not obvious? You are welcome to refuse, but know that I will forbid you from joining the fight in Ehrenfest.”

“Okay...” I said, my shoulders slumped.

“Lady Rozemyne, please remember your standing when you interact with Lord Ferdinand,” Leonore warned as we made our way to the castle. “You are still publicly engaged to Lord Wilfried, so your cavorting with another man will only arouse suspicion. You and Lord Ferdinand seemed more like an intimate couple than a guardian and his charge.”

“Did we?” I asked, my head cocked. “But we’ve always been this close. Nobody seemed to care before.”

"It was more acceptable when you looked so much younger. Oh, how could Lord Ferdinand commit such a tremendous faux pas? He must have known what rumors it would cause..."

"I don't think he cared who was watching or what kind of an impact it might have on my reputation. His only concern was purging the Lanzenavians as quickly and as thoroughly as he could."

Leonore was indignant about the damage this would potentially cause to my honor. As a knight in my service, she had every right to be annoyed, but we had acted only out of necessity. There hadn't been any other way for Ferdinand to give out instructions while keeping both his bible and his poor health hidden from the others.

"Should someone who claims to be your guardian really show such open disregard for your reputation?" Leonore asked, evidently furious.

Truth be told, I cared a lot more about Ferdinand's health and cleaning up this mess than about the public's perception of me. I couldn't say that to Leonore, though—it would only make the situation worse.

"I can't even pretend to know what Ferdinand was thinking," I said. "We'll need to ask him later."

Besides, there's an even greater problem on my mind...

I paused in thought, still able to feel Leonore's outrage behind me. Had it been reckless to promise that I would continue being an aub and give Ferdinand a laboratory here in Ahrensbach? Wouldn't that seem crazy from an outside perspective?

Especially when Ferdinand gets so immersed in his research that he loses sight of everything else. Maybe I should convince Sylvester to build him a lab in Ehrenfest instead...

"Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne! I am moved beyond words!" Clarissa exclaimed the moment we arrived at the castle. "Letters have already been sent to Aubs Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger!"

"How convenient. I was just about to contact them. Thank you for saving me the time, Clarissa."

"And we received their responses. Aub Dunkelfelger granted us permission to lead his knights into Ehrenfest. Aub Ehrenfest said, 'Well done.'"

Clarissa then led us into the castle. We passed several Ahrensbach nobles as we traversed its halls, and they all shouted,

“Lady Rozemyne!” upon seeing me. Their enthusiasm spoke to Clarissa’s hard work, but it was honestly kind of scary.

“Um, Lady Rozemyne...” Letizia said when we reached our destination, “we have set up a guest room for you over here.”

“I am touched that you would go to the trouble. You must be exhausted from all that you’ve been through, so please get some rest when you can.”

She gave me a look of concern. “Thank you, but I must wait for my attendants. Dunkelfelger’s knights are having a feast, you see...”

“Ah, that sounds like a most uncomfortable burden. Where might Lady Hannelore be?”

“She went to return the wolfaniels to their owners.”

So the boisterous knights are entirely unsupervised...

I asked Letizia to guide me to the grand hall, where Dunkelfelger’s knights were holding their feast under the guise of a postbattle review. Even through the closed doors, I could hear them raving about the awesomeness of Leidenschaft’s spears, and all the ways they could use Ewigeliebe’s sword in future ditter matches.

I stepped into the hall and was immediately met with a sea of smiling faces.

“Lady Rozemyne!” Heissshitze exclaimed. “The ritual today was splendid. Just absolutely—”

“I came to thank you all for your excellent performance, but I must say... I am *shocked*. Did Lord Ferdinand not tell you that a ditter match isn’t over until one’s foundation is safe? Is it customary in Dunkelfelger to drink in the middle of a game?”

The air froze over all at once. Several of the knights bunched together in a futile attempt to hide the barrels of beer behind them.

“To think you would feast instead of resting in preparation for tomorrow...” I continued. “I wonder, would Lord Ferdinand even bother to take such knights to Ehrenfest?”

“We shall clean up at once and get to bed. When are we to depart?”

“That will depend on when I recover.”

Once the knights had calmed down, I said poignantly that I was looking forward to their service tomorrow and then exited the hall. Letizia and her retainers were visibly relieved; none of them had the experience necessary to wrangle Dunkelfelgerians.

“I thank you ever so much, Lady Rozemyne.”

“There is no need for that—not when I was the one who

brought them here,” I replied. “Now, Lady Letizia... As much as it pains me to deprive you of your rest, could you ask the chefs to prepare food that can be eaten cold? We won’t be able to cater such a large group otherwise.”

I suggested several recipes from among the ones I’d sent her before retiring to the guest room prepared for me. I cleaned myself with a waschen, drank double my usual dose of the ultra-nasty rejuvenation potion, and then climbed into my Pandabus to rest.

Rumors and a Departure

Where am I...?

It was dark, the mattress below me was too bouncy to be my usual bed, and when I groped around, I realized that I was trapped inside something.

Oh, wait. I'm inside Lessy.

It had taken me a moment to remember my situation. I'd slept with the windows of my Pandabus closed to eliminate the risk of any of my male retainers seeing me in such a state of disarray. The rejuvenation potion I'd taken before bed had worked like a charm; my stamina and mana had both fully recovered.

I'd gone to sleep immediately after my waschen, so I was still wearing my riding clothes. I made a half-hearted attempt to put my hair up and cracked open one of the windows to see the back of Angelica's head right in front of me.

"Good morning, Angelica. Might I ask you to summon an attendant to prepare me for the day?"

"At once."

Angelica sent an ordonnanz and then shooed my male retainers out of the room. Leonore entered shortly afterward with an apprentice attendant.

"Good morning, Lady Rozemyne. How are you feeling?"

"I seem to have fully recovered and thus feel wonderful."

Leonore heaved a sigh, and a calming smile spread across her face. "Two whole days have passed since you took the potion. Your lack of response had us worried."

"Excuse me?!"

I'd used up so much of my mana and stamina that my sleep had been more like a coma. My retainers had all been deathly anxious, but Ferdinand, who had told them how much potion to give me in the first place, had assured them that I would wake up in two or three days.

"And what is Ferdinand doing now?" I asked. "I doubt he saw my slumber as an opportunity to rest." A lot could change in two

days; no way was he still waiting around in Ahrensbach.

Leonore nodded, indicating that my assumption was correct. "He went to Ehrenfest leading a group of Dunkelfelger knights."

"So he left me behind...?" I asked for emphasis. He'd told me to drink the potion if I wanted to join him, so it seemed a little cruel that he'd rushed off without me.

It wasn't easy drinking twice my usual dose!

"To be precise, Dunkelfelger's knights became too rowdy to be kept in the castle," Leonore explained. "Lord Ferdinand had no choice but to leave with them."

In the heat of battle, the knights followed their commander's orders to the letter, but their composure quickly faded when they didn't have anything to do. During my absence, they had apparently tried to hold more feasts and challenge Ahrensbach's already busy knights to dither under the guise of "training for the next battle." Ferdinand had taken them to Ehrenfest to put a stop to their troublemaking.

"Hold on a moment," I said. "Does that mean Ferdinand didn't have *any* time to recover?"

"He spent an entire day in his hidden room, so I assume he got some rest," Leonore said, then asked me to step out of my highbeast so that she could clothe me. I did as instructed and was promptly seated in front of a mirror.

"I am here to help dress you," said the apprentice attendant. "You may call me Fairseele."

"You were rescued alongside Lady Letizia, were you not?" I asked. "Were you both able to get some rest?"

"Yes," she replied with a gentle smile. "Lady Letizia is doing especially well. I... thank you ever so much for saving her."

Fairseele continued to thank me while preparing to wash my face. First I'd sent Letizia sweets to help her through the grueling education Ferdinand was giving her. Then I'd rescued her from one of Lanzenave's ships, having elected to treat her not as a member of a rebellious duchy but as a victim and a prisoner. To get more people to accept me as the new Aub Ahrensbach, the nobles targeted by Lanzenave were now being made to mingle with those Hartmut and Clarissa had successfully brainwashed.

Ferdinand gave the order, but that shouldn't detract from how hard Letizia has been working.

"Lord Ferdinand told us you would be asleep for three days or

so, but we were still worried..." Fairseele continued. "Lady Letizia in particular was terribly frightened that you would not wake up at all. Would you care to have your next meal with her and Lady Hannelore to ease their concerns?"

I turned to look at Leonore. Given the circumstances, I wanted to know whether it was acceptable for me to agree. She gave a small nod.

"Then we shall make the necessary arrangements," Fairseele said. She sent an ordonnanz out of the room, then swapped out the tools she'd used to wash my hair for a brush and started arranging my tresses into braids. "You truly are blessed by the God of Darkness; like Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom, you have hair as dark and as captivating as the night sky. I see those two retainers of yours were telling the truth."

Someone please stop them... They're only doing as Ferdinand instructed, but still... Please...

She continued, "They have been so passionate in teaching our nobles how wonderful you are and warning them how closely our situation resembles that of history's Eisenreich. Our nobles are shaking with trepidation as we await the royal family's judgment."

Ahrensbach had faced a severe purge as a result of the recent civil war, so it was terrifying to imagine what would come of a rebellion with a foreign power. Hartmut and Clarissa had done an excellent job of stirring up fear among the nobles.

I'm sure they've exaggerated a little, but... the nobles really should be worried. Like, seriously.

"You truly are the avatar of Mestionora, Lady Rozemyne—a savior come to Ahrensbach in its time of need, returned to us after all this time to receive the Book of Wisdom and deliver the Grutrisheit to the royal family."

Um...

"Are you not here to rule as one chosen by the gods and purge the Goddess of Chaos's influence from Ahrensbach?"

Waaaaaah! What the heck is going on?! Only one person could have done something like this... Curse you, Ferdinand!

As much as I wanted to give him a piece of my mind, he wasn't here anymore. I also wanted to cradle my head, but I couldn't while Fairseele was doing my hair. The most I could do was let out a quiet groan.

As I stared in the mirror, I noticed that Fairseele was wearing a

light-violet cape over her work clothes. It was marked with a large “X” drawn in blue and yellow lines, the purpose of which was unknown to me. “Fairseele, do Ahrensbach attendants normally wear capes when working?” I asked. “Yours seems to be getting in your way...”

“No, but these are special circumstances. Those whom Lord Ferdinand deemed not to have any malice toward you or Ehrenfest were given these marked capes to wear. Anyone seen without one is captured on sight and detained until they have been judged as well.”

To my surprise, Ferdinand had formed Schutzaria’s shield over Lessy while I was asleep and checked the malice of the Ahrensbach nobles.

I sure hope they had a way of knowing if anyone was just hostile to gruns...

Once I was dressed and presentable, my retainers flooded into the room; they had been ever so worried as a result of my sudden, prolonged slumber. Cornelius peered at my face and triple-checked that I was safe, while Matthias and Laurenz just slumped over in relief.

“I am fully recovered,” I assured them all. “How are things in Ehrenfest...?”

“As much as I would rather you continue to rest, I’m just as worried about the situation back home...” Cornelius said. “If you want to go, I won’t stop you.”

I smiled and nodded. We needed to check on our home duchy and tell Sylvester how we were faring.

“Lady Rozemyne,” Laurenz interjected, “Lord Ferdinand said that if you insist on going to Ehrenfest, you should confirm his location with an ordonnanz before using the teleporter.”

Perhaps to make up for leaving me behind, Ferdinand was permitting me to exercise my authority as an aub and use the duchy’s teleporter to catch up with him. That was good to know.

“An ordonnanz arrived earlier informing us that Lord Ferdinand and the Dunkelfelger knights were about to reach Seitzen, where the border gate is located. They will consult the guards there and spend the afternoon resting before continuing into Ehrenfest.”

“Then I shall use the teleporter to reach the border gate first,” I said.

“Please don’t!” Matthias shouted in response. “That’s much too

dangerous!”

At my knight's frantic encouragement, I sent an ordonnanz to Ferdinand telling him that I'd woken up and that I intended to activate the teleporter to the border gate. He replied that he would contact me when he arrived and that I shouldn't use the teleporter before then. There wasn't much I could do but sit and wait.

Having observed the ordonnanz exchange, Cornelius approached somewhat hesitantly. “Rozemyne... Are you planning to stay here as Aub Ahrensbach? That's what the rumors and even Lord Ferdinand claim.”

“Indeed,” I said. “If possible, I would like to create my own library city.”

“What?” Cornelius stared at me, positively bewildered. “*That's* your reason for staying here? Not to rule Ahrensbach with a just hand...?”

I nodded. “The library city is my foremost desire, but everything will depend on our negotiations with the royal family. As it stands... few things in my life have gone as I wished.”

My dream of making books with Lutz while supplying mana as an apprentice blue shrine maiden had been crushed by my adoption into the archducal family, and my wish to spend the time until my tenth birthday with my lower-city family had been cast aside by Count Bindewald. We'd also put aside two years for my education, which had ultimately been devoured by my time in the jureve. I could still remember waking up to find that everyone had grown up without me. And now that I'd finally caught up with them, I was receiving all manner of strange looks.

But of course, the list of unfortunate twists didn't end there. I'd never wanted Ferdinand to move to Ahrensbach, and when I'd prayed that he would at least stay safe, he had nearly died in an attempt on his life. I also wanted to stay in Ehrenfest, but there wasn't a place for me there anymore.

“By settling into the position of Aub Ahrensbach, I should be able to lead the duchy as Ferdinand suggested,” I said. “But as it stands, with my adoption into the royal family looming over me, I do not expect my wish to come true.”

“Rozemyne?”

“Grutrisheit or no, do you really expect the royal family to let me go so easily? Ruling as Aub Ahrensbach is like a dream within a dream...” I was glad that Ferdinand had suggested it, and I wanted

it to come true, but I sincerely doubted it would.

“I see...” Cornelius rested a hand on my head with a conflicted expression. “How unusually realistic of you.”

Following my conversation with my retainers, I was taken to the dining hall. I would technically be eating breakfast while the others ate lunch. Letizia, Hannelore, and their retainers were waiting for me inside.

“How do you feel, Lady Rozemyne?” Hannelore asked.

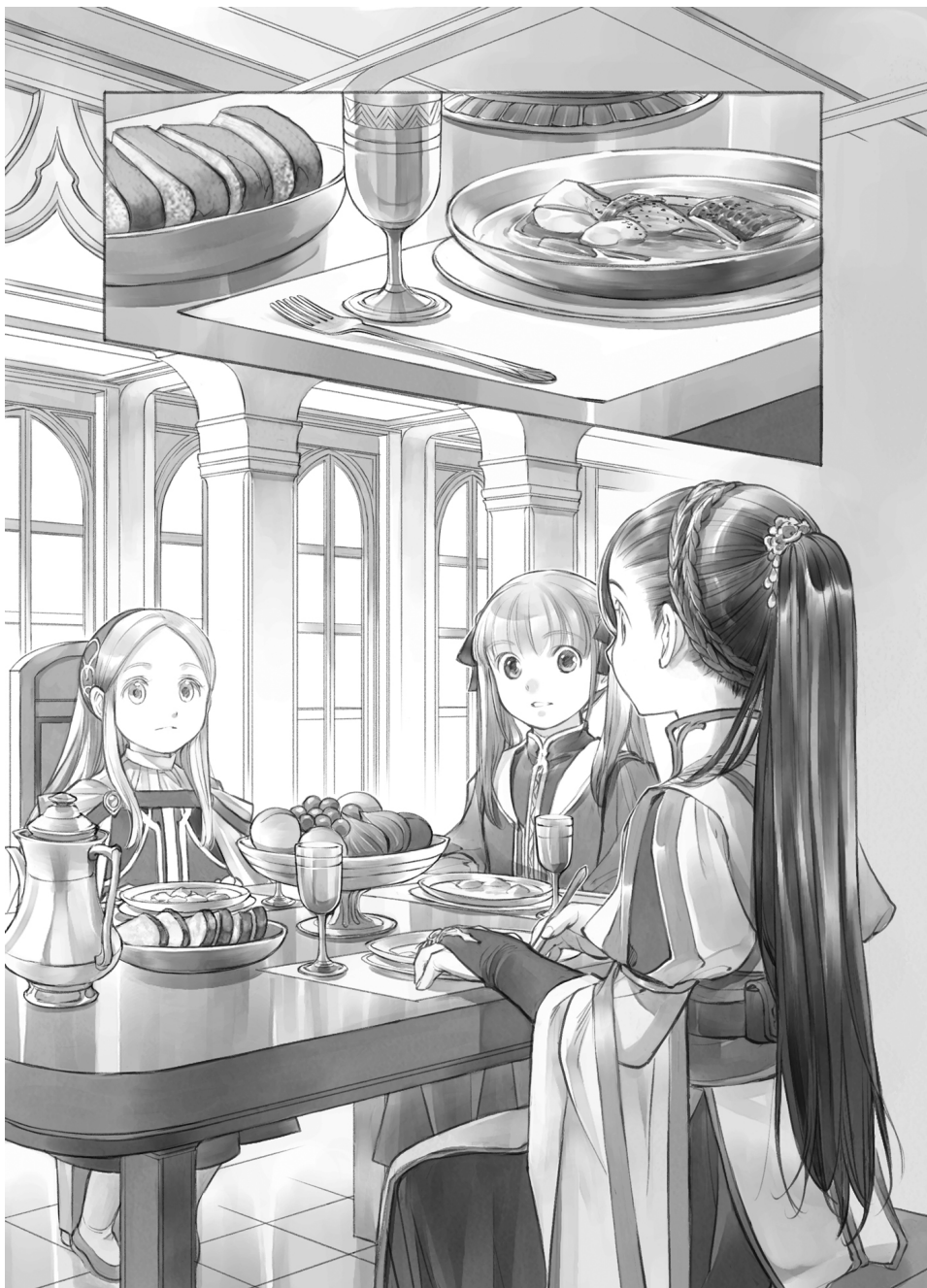
“As good as can be.”

“We have prepared some healthy dishes for everyone,” Letizia said.

“I thank you ever so much.”

Letizia and her retainers were all wearing capes adorned with blue-and-yellow crosses. I hadn’t thought much of it when it had just been Fairseele, but now it was abundantly clear what the marks represented: subjugation by Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger.

“This mark is also being worn by the knights Lord Ferdinand is leading to keep them from capturing or attacking each other by mistake,” Letizia said with a smile as if she had read my mind. “It is purely for distinguishing friend from foe.”



As I enjoyed some spicy and very flavorful soup, Hannelore told me what I'd missed while I was asleep. "Our knights finished their search of the Lanzenave Estate, and as Lady Letizia said, there was a door within that could be opened only by the aub. Lord Ferdinand said it was connected to a villa for housing the Lanzenave princesses."

The estate had since been sealed off. Now that I was Aub Ahrensbach, those who had gone through the door wouldn't be able to return without my approval.

Hannelore continued, "The teleportation circle to the Royal Academy and the door between the central building and the dormitory require both the aub's mana and registration brooches. Lady Detlinde's group should not be able to return by teleporter."

"I thank you ever so much, Lady Hannelore."

"Think nothing of it. I would expect nothing less from Dunkelfelger's knights, considering how much they ate and drank. I am more concerned about the burden on Lord Ferdinand, who had so little time to rest."

The knights had apparently been champing at the bit to help Ferdinand while he was sick, but not one of them had suggested that he take some time to rest.

And that's the problem with Dunkelfelgerians!

"As we speak, Ahrensbach's scholars are performing the rote task of pressing the numerous feystones we retrieved against registration medals to determine whom they belonged to." Letizia cast her eyes down. "Lord Ferdinand said the casualties were minimized, but... there were still a great many."

I wasn't sure how best to console her.

"If Ferdinand said they were minimized, then this really must have been the best outcome. You warned Strahl of the danger, did you not? Then he did as you instructed and protected the nobles. It was so gracious of you to order him to prioritize saving the others when you were in Lanzenave's clutches."

"But Lady Rozemyne, I..."

I pressed a finger against my lips, urging the teary-eyed Letizia not to say another word. She had promised Ferdinand that she would act as though nothing had happened.

"We can discuss the details of your situation when we reunite

with Ferdinand,” I said. “I must return to Ehrenfest after we’ve eaten, so I ask you to be patient.”

Letizia nodded, one hand clapped firmly over her mouth. Meanwhile, Hannelore blinked at me in confusion.

“Lady Rozemyne, what of the foundation here? As the aub, it is your duty to protect it. That you would abandon your treasure partway through the match to travel to Ehrenfest is unthinkable.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “Lady Hannelore, if someone wishes to steal Ahrensbach’s foundation, they are welcome to it. But I cannot think of anyone who would want to claim a duchy mid-rebellion without the royal family’s authority.”

If anyone was foolish enough to make such a bold move, I wouldn’t get in their way. They would need to take on the standard duties of an aub *and* all the work Ferdinand was doing for the duchy’s sake.

“And even if someone were to take it,” I continued, “my life would not be at risk. Those who steal a foundation customarily destroy the medals of the archducal family they have supplanted, but my medal is still in Ehrenfest. Not to mention, I know how to reach Ahrensbach’s foundation. If, for some reason, I need it back, I can always just steal it again. I doubt anyone would defeat me in a test of mana.”

Hannelore paused in thought before giggling. “That certainly is true.” Then she announced that she would come with me to Ehrenfest.

“Wait, really?” I asked. “Were you not told to stay here for the sake of your safety?”

“Not quite. Lord Ferdinand instructed me to guard you, our team’s greatest treasure, for the remainder of the match.”

Once we’d eaten, I was taken to another room to draw a teleporter large enough for us all to travel together. Ferdinand had already decided who would accompany me in the event that I decided to rush to Ehrenfest: my retainers, Hannelore’s squad, and five Ahrensbach knights. They were all gathered and ready.

As I got to work on the circle, one of the knights stepped forward and said, “I cannot put into words how fortunate I am to have been blessed with an opportunity to guard the avatar of Mestionora. We are grateful to no end that you are heading into battle to save our compatriots. Praise be to the gods! Glory be to

Lady Rozemyne!”

“Eep?!”

Hearing someone praise me as though I were equal to the gods made me step back on instinct. It was a pretty tame reaction, all things considered—especially when I caught Hartmut nodding his approval. How had Ahrensbach’s nobles changed so drastically in only two days?

“I, um...”

“Our preparations are made, so we shall depart for Seitzen as soon as we hear back from Lord Ferdinand,” Laurenz announced with a smile before sending an ordonnanz to the man in question. Was he pretending not to notice my displeasure, or was this all part of some devious plan?

A response arrived in short order: “Teleport to Bindewald, not Seitzen; it has come to our attention that a flood of knights crossed its border into Ehrenfest last night. We have just entered the province ourselves, and its summer estate should soon come into view. I would rather we rendezvous first and then proceed into Ehrenfest together. Hurry.”

I gazed around at a sea of tense faces. “Everyone, put your hands on the circle and channel your mana into it.”

They all did as instructed and joined me in pouring mana into the teleporter. As light and darkness swirled around us, I produced my schtappe and tapped it against the circle.

“*Nenluessel*. Bindewald.”

Bindewald

“Goodness *gracious!*”

My eyes were still squeezed shut as I tried to fight back my teleportation sickness, but I quickly recognized the ear-piercing screech that accompanied our arrival in Bindewald. It was almost nostalgic, maybe because I’d spent so little time at the Royal Academy this year. I opened my eyes to check, and indeed, Fraularm was rushing toward us—with three other women in tow.

Now that’s a face I haven’t seen in a while. Can’t say I’ve missed it.

“One moment a magic circle appears in the garden. The next, here you are!” Fraularm screeched. “Just *what* is going on?!”

“Professor Fraularm...”

“She’s no longer a professor, Lady Rozemyne...” Hannelore whispered to me. “She behaved so improperly that she was, um... made to resign.”

I could vaguely remember hearing about that. Fraularm’s resignation explained why she was here in Ahrensbach, plus I’d already known she was related to Count Bindewald, but I still hadn’t expected to see her out of the blue like this.

“How *unthinkable* that Ehrenfest nobles would arrive here!” Fraularm declared. “Unthinkable and unacceptable!”

“Indeed, my sister! Unthinkable and unacceptable!” one of the three women echoed. “This is the problem with Ehrenfest!”

It wasn’t long before Fraularm and her crew were all pointing and barking at us. They looked so alike and spoke in such similar tones that I had to imagine they were all related.

“We aren’t *all* from Ehrenfest...” Hannelore muttered, sounding a little dejected. Then she whipped out her shtappe and wrapped Fraularm in bands of light.

Wha—?!

Hannelore had moved so naturally that I struggled to even process what she’d just done. Her squad moved with her, and in the literal blink of an eye, all four women were restrained. They weren’t wearing silver clothes or anything of the sort, but the feat

still astounded me.

Hannelore looked up at the other knights, who were just as shocked as I was, and sighed. “Knights of Ahrensbach, you are much too slow to react to danger,” she said with a smile, her voice as gentle as always. “Yes, having to restrain nobles of your own duchy might give you pause, but you cannot protect Lady Rozemyne as you are now. I know you can do better.”

She really does match her duchy's reputation...

“Do you honestly believe these four are the only ones here who might oppose her?” Hannelore continued. She then nodded toward the estate, spurring the Ahrensbach knights to create their highbeasts and take flight.

You're just too well trained, Lady Hannelore.

If she was the standard in Dunkelfelger, I would never be able to survive there. As cool and admirable as she was, trying to imitate her was beyond me.

“Goodness! Is that you, Lady Rozemyne?!” Fraularm cried, glaring up at me from the ground. “How are you even here?! Shouldn't you have died already?! Stubbornness is anything but a virtue!”

Hartmut stepped forward and stared down at the former professor. He wore a smile, but his eyes were cold and entirely without compassion. “I shall address you simply as Fraularm, since you have been kicked out of the Royal Academy. Pray tell, what did you mean when you said that Lady Rozemyne should have died already? I see that not even your forced resignation was enough to teach you not to speak so improperly.”

Fraularm must have been deeply ashamed of her removal from the Royal Academy—her face went bright red, and she gave her questioner the fiercest glare she could muster.

Hartmut sneered. “If you were referring to the slow-acting poison that was smeared on our bible, we discovered and removed it before Lady Rozemyne ever touched the book.”

Fraularm's eyes opened wide in disbelief, prompting Hartmut to broaden his smile and continue. “Of course, if you knew about said poison, that would mean you were involved in the assassination attempt. We will need to investigate you more closely.”

“Goodness me! I received a report and nothing more!” Fraularm said, sharply turning her head away. “There is nothing else I can tell you!”

Hartmut turned to Cornelius and gestured at the disgraced professor now pouting on the ground. “We don’t have time to interrogate her now. Make sure she doesn’t die until we know who gave her that report.”

“I know,” Cornelius replied, looking especially stone-faced as he pointed his schtappe at Fraularm.

“Ohohoho... Are you Rozemyne’s retainers? How sad,” said one of the other women on the ground, staring up at Hartmut and Cornelius with sympathetic eyes. Her hair color aside, she looked a lot like Fraularm. “I find it so sad that you continue to serve her, deceived and ignorant of her true nature. She is a commoner shrine maiden who once arranged the downfall of my husband. A commoner, I tell you! A commoner!”

I was so startled that I grabbed my chest. The woman, who had erupted in a victorious, high-pitched cackle, was apparently the wife of Count Toad, the very same noble who had invaded the temple all those years ago.

“Oh, are there still fools out there who believe those lies?” Hartmut asked, stepping between the woman and me. “A foolish knight was once executed for harming Lady Rozemyne under that misconception. It boggles the mind that anyone else would cast aside reason so eagerly.”

“Hartmut...” I said.

He knew about my commoner origins but took my hand nonetheless. “Fear not, Lady Rozemyne. That falsehood might have carried some weight when you were being raised in secret within the temple, but only those who have lost their minds or are blinded by their emotions would believe it now. This woman simply refuses to accept that her husband committed a grave crime.”

“Goodness! How rude!”

“I speak only the truth!”

Hartmut didn’t even spare the screeching women a glance; he smiled at me again, then looked around at everyone gathered. “Let us assume for a moment that these rumors about Lady Rozemyne are true. It would mean a commoner came first-in-class at the Royal Academy three years in a row. Lady Hannelore, as someone who has shared classes with her, what do you think?”

Hannelore’s eyes moved from Fraularm to me. “Lady Rozemyne is able to grant blessings simply by strumming the harspiel and turns feystones into gold dust just by squeezing them. No

commoner could manage such grand achievements.”

“Lady Hannelore is right—a commoner could never be so talented at ditter,” her knights agreed. Then they actually started to bemoan that fact and the amount of potential that was apparently being squandered. I struggled to follow their train of thought, but they seemed ready to accept anyone as a noble as long as they could play ditter well enough.

“Do not be fooled as my husband was!” the toad’s wife cried. “He endured such great suffering at the hands of Ehrenfest!”

At that moment, the Ahrensbach knights who had gone to search the estate returned with ten or so women and children, all restrained. “Lady Rozemyne, these are all the nobles we found. The servants are tied up inside the estate,” their representative informed me. “Did, um... something happen in our absence?”

Having caught us midway through our dispute with Fraularm’s group, the knights all tensed up.

Leonore stepped forward, laughing. “This woman claims that Lady Rozemyne is a commoner. Even if we humored the idea, would that not cast great shame on Ahrensbach for allowing her to steal its foundation overnight?”

“Goodness! Gracious! Me!” Fraularm shrieked. “Lies in their purest form! Ehrenfest must be a hive of deceivers!”

The news that Ahrensbach’s foundation had been stolen might not have reached Bindewald yet, but was she not suspicious that we’d teleported *people* within the duchy’s borders? Evidently not, as she and her cronies continued to rant about this and that.

Dunkelfelger’s knights were losing their patience. They told the women to shut up and that they were only embarrassing themselves.

Leonore laughed again, even more provocatively this time. “Not a single noble was able to find the Grutrissheit—not even the royal family. Yet the gods bestowed it upon Lady Rozemyne! If you truly believe she is a commoner, then your heads must be empty.” She shot a glance at the newly returned knights. “Do these women speak for everyone in Ahrensbach?”

“As an Ahrensbach noble, I would rather you not lump us together with these madwomen,” one of the knights said. “Nobody in their right mind would believe that Lady Rozemyne is a commoner.”

“We’ve seen her close the country and border gates with our

very own eyes,” said another before resting cold eyes on the tied-up women. “Please stop regurgitating lies—for our duchy’s sake, if not your own.”

“Your frustrations and resentment must have festered while you were stuck here in this backwater estate, isolated from the truth. Do not expect us to sympathize with your foolishness.”

The toad’s wife glowered at me, trembling all the while; even the nobles of her own duchy were regarding her with scorn. “Tell them the truth, Rozemyne!” she shrieked. “Stop deceiving them!”

“I do not know what you expect me to say...” I replied. “I understand that it must have hurt when your husband was imprisoned and your sister fired, but you really must open your eyes to the truth. Only the aub can place the kind of teleportation circles used to transport people. I truly am Aub Ahrensbach.”

Not a single lie had passed my lips. Sure, I’d skipped over everything about my being a commoner, but it was more pertinent to focus on my current position.

“That cannot be true! This girl is a commoner! My husband was the victim of an Ehrenfest scheme!”

“Everyone! Do not let Rozemyne deceive you!” Fraularm added. Her protests ended there, however, as Cornelius stomped on her head.

“Don’t you *dare* insult my little sister again.”

“Cornelius...!”

“Don’t worry, Rozemyne. I’ll make sure not to kill them.”

That’s not what I’m worried about!

As I tried to find my words, another voice came from the sky. “Cornelius. What are you doing?”

“Eckhart!” I cried as he led Ferdinand and a group of Dunkelfelger’s knights down into the courtyard. “You’re late, Ferdinand.”

“We spotted a group of nobles returning from Ehrenfest and captured them. How is your health?”

“I slept so deeply that you left without me, but I’m fully recovered as a result.” I shot a glance at the knights under his command, then returned my attention to him. “You, on the other hand, must not have rested at all.”

“I was able to get *some* rest,” Ferdinand replied. He took my hand, then muttered, “Ah. I cannot perform an examination like this” and released it. His armor must have been the problem

because he removed a portion from the back of his hand, which he then pressed against my wrist, forehead, and neck.

Fraularm's eyes shot open. "Goodness gracious! What perversity is this?! People are watching, you heathens!"

"This is a medical examination, but I cannot focus on her heartbeat while you are making so much noise. Silence her, Eckhart."

"Yes, my lord!" the faithful archknight replied. He shoved a gag in Fraularm's mouth and ordered her not to make another sound.

I stared quizzically at Ferdinand as he proceeded with his examination. "Um... *Is this perverse?*"

"Anyone who sees a medical examination as perverse has their own perverse mind to blame. It is nothing for you to worry about. You seem to be fine... but do you genuinely intend to join us in Ehrenfest? There is much there you will not want to see."

I paused, but my mind was made up. As much as I preferred to avoid the horrid sights of battle, sitting this one out wasn't an option.

"I do."

"Very well... Now, what is this unsightly display?" Ferdinand asked, gesturing to the people tied up on the ground.

"The nobles tasked with welcoming the giebess upon their return from invading Ehrenfest," an Ahrensbach knight replied. "We have finished searching the estate."

Ferdinand stared down at Fraularm, whose head was still beneath Cornelius's boot. "Cornelius, if you are to kick and stomp on her, focus on her stomach. We will need her mind intact if we are to read her memories, and the last thing we want to do is waste mana healing her."

"Yes, sir!"

"As I mentioned, we captured a group of nobles on our way here," Ferdinand said, nodding toward the men currently dangling from Dunkelfelger's highbeasts. "They are giebess who were using black weapons to sap the mana from our duchy's earth."

"Black weapons?!"

"They were stealing the mana from Ehrenfest's earth...?"

Ferdinand raised a hand to silence them. "Indeed, rather than filling their Spring Prayer chalices with their own mana, the nobles of Old Werkestock have been stealing mana from Ehrenfest. They divided into two groups and are working in great numbers to drain

our earth.”

There hadn't been many knights among the group of giebels, so capturing and interrogating them had been painfully easy.

“Griebel and Illgner in the southwest were attacked first. Ehrenfest sent troops there to reinforce them, leaving none for Gerlach, where a hard-fought battle rages on as we speak,” Ferdinand explained. It was because we were needed in Gerlach that he had told us to meet him in Bindewald, not Seitzen. “If you had not decided to join us, we would already have been in Gerlach by now.”

I decided not to say anything. Matthias had snapped at me once already for suggesting that we rush ahead to the border gate instead of waiting to rendezvous.

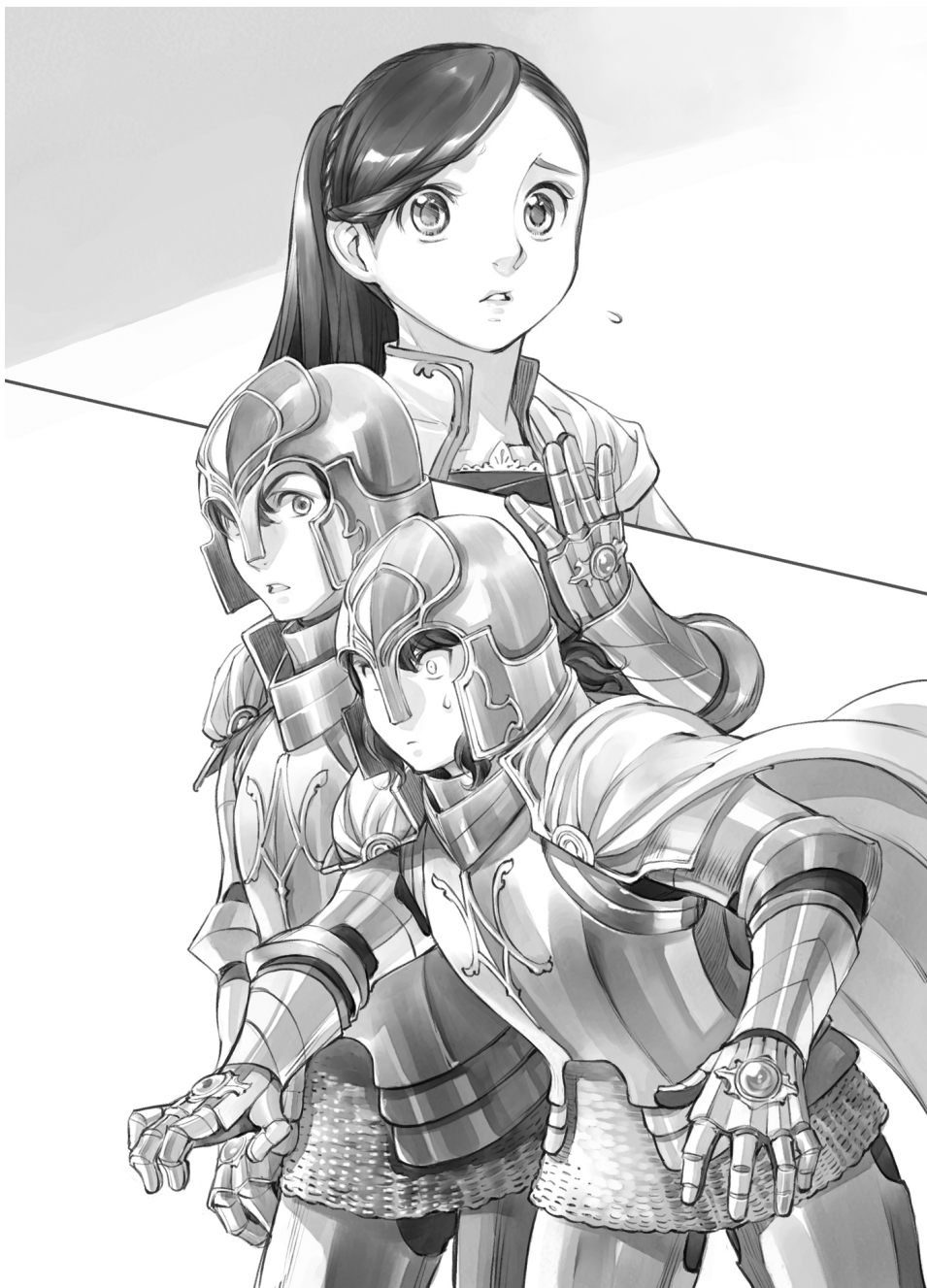
Ferdinand continued, “The attack on Gerlach is being led by one of Georgine's closest confidants: a man with an artificial left hand. He seems to know the area particularly well.”

“That must be my fath—I mean, um, Grausam,” Matthias interjected, pressing his lips together and squinting in the direction of Gerlach.

“Matthias...” I said.

“Be at ease, Lady Rozemyne—I will not waver.”

“How can she *be at ease* when you're acting so grave?” Laurenz asked, then gave his fellow knight a firm slap on the back. He must have put a lot of strength into it, because Matthias stumbled forward before fixing Laurenz with a glare.



“You don’t need to fight this battle alone,” Laurenz continued. “Come on.”

I weighed in with a gentle “He’s right, Matthias. Would you rather sit this one out entirely? I could never ask you to fight against your father, so please leave this battle to the others.”

“I appreciate your consideration, but there are many nobles in Ehrenfest who were made criminals because of Grausam’s actions,” Matthias replied. “Many lost their parents as well. I cannot back down now.”

Ferdinand gave a brisk nod and said, “If that is your will. Let us send the criminals to Ahrensbach’s castle and then hurry along to Ehrenfest.”

Dunkelfelger’s knights rebound the giebels—this time with proper rope—before roughly dumping them on the teleportation circle. Ahrensbach’s knights then added the women and children from Bindewald’s summer estate. I had to wonder whether the teleporter would even work with so many people on it.

Ferdinand sent an ordonnanz to the knights back at the castle, instructing them to lock up the prisoners who were about to arrive. He waited for them to acknowledge the order, then turned to me and said, “Rozemyne.”

I nodded and activated the teleportation circle: “*Nenluessel*. Ahrensbach.”

Once the criminals were out of our hair, we started toward Gerlach by highbeast. Because we intended to cross the border instead of going through the gate, Sylvester would sense us and no doubt assume we were enemy reinforcements from Ahrensbach. We would need to send an ordonnanz announcing ourselves as allies the moment we were back in Ehrenfest.

There’s less green here than there was at Lamprecht’s wedding...

Bindewald’s summer estate had been brimming with mana—but from above, the rest of the province reminded me of a nearly barren wasteland.

“Ferdinand,” I said.

“Spring Prayer can wait. We have more pressing matters to attend to.”

“I know, but...” In a situation like this, it was always the commoners who struggled most. They must have been starving en

masse.

“Bindewald has lacked mana for some time now. You should instead worry about Gerlach, which is having its mana stolen as we speak.”

As he had warned, once we crossed the border, I started seeing massive brown patches of earth across Gerlach’s otherwise rich greenery. The province’s mana wasn’t distributed evenly at all; it looked like a trombe had just gone on a rampage.

“There is the diversion...”

Ferdinand pointed at a clump of knights engaged in battle. They were wearing light-violet and dark-yellow capes, and there were bright flashes as the mana they hurled at each other collided.

“And *there* are the giebes.”

Separate from the massive battle were several groups wearing light-violet capes. Great patches of brown earth were spreading out beneath them.

Black Weapons and Chalice

“Strahl told us he could not find the knights of Old Werkestock,” Ferdinand said. “They must be the ones fighting our diversion.”

The diversion in question was the group farthest from where we were waiting near the border. I used enhancement magic to reinforce my vision, then squinted to get a better look. Giebe Gerlach’s order of knights, distinguishable by their dark-yellow capes, was at a clear numerical disadvantage against the knights of Old Werkestock.

“Lady Georgine riled their giebels,” Matthias said, analyzing the situation. “Their skirmish might be a mere diversion to us, but to the knights of Gerlach, it is a battle for survival. They must protect the summer estate behind them at all costs.”

“Sylvester contacted the giebels of each Ehrenfest province and told them to prepare for battle,” I said. “We can assume, then, that Giebe Gerlach’s summer estate is filled with magic tools and the like. Let us unite with them before it falls to the enemy.”

Ferdinand nodded at us both. Henceforth, we would describe Gerlach’s skirmish as not a mere diversion but the main battlefield, to indicate our acknowledgment that the summer estate needed to be defended.

“That said, on our way there, let us destroy the squads Old Werkestock’s giebels are commanding. We cannot risk them combining into an even more troublesome force.”

Ferdinand noted that he wished to make use of our numerical advantage when he could, then stared down at the growing brown splotches. There were four in total, all scattered around the area. He pointed to the one we would reach first on our way to the main battlefield.

“Rozemyne, Lady Hannelore, and the retainers thereof: stay in the air, outside of combat range, and observe the battle. Pay attention to every development in the situation and the numbers of the mana-stealing squads. But first, Rozemyne, contact Aub

Ehrenfest to inform him of our arrival. Secure his belated approval for Aub Ahrensbach to deploy knights within his duchy's borders."

"Right."

"Heissshitze—for now, capture the squads rather than eliminate them. In this era of mana shortages, there is plenty we can use them for."

"Yes, sir!"

Our company of one hundred and fifty Ahrensbach and Dunkelfelger knights was going to descend on a small platoon of thirty-odd nobles supporting a giebe. Barring any extreme surprises, we would win for sure. Dunkelfelger's blue-capes all formed their schtappes and awaited their next order from Ferdinand.

"Lord Ferdinand, I have a request!" Matthias exclaimed, prompting the man in question to turn around. "I seek permission to check the traps I set up with Lord Bonifatius. We must capture Grausam at once, but he is a scholar and a former giebe, not a knight. Rather than being here on the battlefield, I suspect he is hiding somewhere in the forest."

"To check traps, hmm...? Very well. But do nothing else and act in secret; I do not want to see you charging into battle on your own. Inform me as soon as you have found them."

"Yes, sir! Thank you!"

Ferdinand then added ten knights to Hannelore's and my guard before swooping down with his company to attack the platoon below. Matthias watched them go, racked with anguish, then squeezed his blue eyes shut to hide the emotion swirling within them.

"Matthias..." I said.

"I was born and raised in Gerlach. It was my home. I never thought I would see it so ravaged, nor that Grausam would be the one behind it all..."

Even as we spoke, nobles from Old Werkestock were turning Gerlach into a brown wasteland of mana-drained earth. Worse still, they were being led by the province's former giebe—Matthias's own father. The storm of emotions surging through the poor knight's chest must have been indescribable. His trembling, tightly clenched fists seemed to exude both anger and regret.

"We *must* capture Grausam," he said. "My apologies, Lady Rozemyne, but I need to take Laurenz with me; we cannot reveal the location of our province's management cabins to knights of

another duchy.”

“If anything happens, use a rott.”

“I will. I promise.”

Matthias and Laurenz then descended into the forest. As I watched them go, Leonore said, “Lady Rozemyne, we should put some more distance between ourselves and the battle.”

“Agreed. I must send an ordonnanz to the aub.”

We ascended even higher into the air; then I took out a yellow feystone and spoke my message. “Sylvester, this is Rozemyne. I have arrived in Gerlach with Ferdinand and the Dunkelfelger knights. We intend to support the giebe in his battle against Ahrensbach and Old Werkestock. As the new Aub Ahrensbach, I request your permission to act.”

No sooner had the ordonnanz taken flight than Angelica shouted, “Lady Rozemyne! There’s another platoon! Some of them fled into the forest!”

Hannelore leaned out of her highbeast to look. “There are bound to be several more lying in wait among the trees. It is our duty to find them, Lady Rozemyne.”

I nodded, enhanced my vision, and then leaned out of my own highbeast to inspect our surroundings. We had no idea how many enemies might be lurking below.

“It’s strange, though...” she continued. “Black weaponry or not, they should only be able to steal one person’s worth of mana each. How have they absorbed this much from Gerlach with so few troops?”

That was bugging me too. They were stealing mana for Old Werkestock, sure, but a group of their size would never usually be able to produce such large brown splotches.

“Not to mention,” I said, “what do they intend to do with the mana they take? If Lady Georgine wants to steal and rule Ehrenfest, her actions here will only cause her more trouble down the line.” Aubs needed to keep their land filled with mana, so she would inevitably need to replace whatever she and her accomplices stole.

Hannelore gazed down at the barren earth beneath us and nodded. “Certainly. She must have other plans for Ehrenfest once she obtains the foundation...” As someone who had taken the archduke candidate course with me, she understood well the strangeness of our situation.

“She must only care about destroying our duchy...” Leonore

said just as a small flock of ordonnanzes scattered through the air. They had come from where Ferdinand and the others were headed.

Everyone fell silent as we focused on the birds, trying to follow them with our eyes.

“There were seven ordonnanzes!” Leonore said. “One went to the main battlefield while the others flew to Old Werkestock’s platoons!”

So there are six platoons? That’s one more than I thought.

“Did anyone see where the ordonnanz for the sixth platoon went?” I asked.

“In the same direction as the ordonnanz headed to the main battlefield. Perhaps one was for Grausam and the other for the Knight’s Order. They might have united already.”

“Lady Rozemyne, several scouts from the platoons and the main battlefield are on the move. They appear to have noticed us.”

As the knights around me raised their voices, an ordonnanz from Sylvester arrived: “You have permission to use military force.” It was time to send one of my own.

“Ferdinand—our foes just sent out seven ordonnanzes, two of which made for the main battlefield. Aub Ehrenfest has given us permission to attack.”

The bird sped away—and a few seconds later, a deafening explosion flattened the nearby tree line.

“Well, that was aggressive...” I muttered. “He must have been champing at the bit.”

“Actually... that might have been Dunkelfelger’s knights,” Hannelore said apologetically. “They are gleefully devastating Ehrenfest’s land... Please forgive them.”

I know this is a battle, but I do wish they would show some restraint...

Ferdinand crushed the platoon with his overwhelming numbers before sending an ordonnanz for us to reunite. I decided to leave some scouts high up in the air while I descended with Hannelore.

“Eep!”

In the blink of an eye, roughly half of the Dunkelfelger company shot up out of the forest and sped past us. They approached the next platoon with blistering speed and then attacked.

“Lady Rozemyne, let us focus on reuniting with Lord Ferdinand,” Hannelore said with a glance at her duchy’s knights. I

nodded, and we rendezvoused with the group of ocher, blue, and violet capes below. Ferdinand and his knights were surrounding thirty hostages.

“They were using black weaponry and small chalices,” Ferdinand said, shaking one of the chalices in my direction. “Old Werkestock’s giebes hoped to be made giebes of New Ehrenfest once Georgine obtained its foundation.”

The platoon of bound nobles glared up at Ferdinand and me. Cornelius and Angelica protectively stepped between us and them.

“As you know,” Ferdinand continued, “the chalices are divine instruments meant to store the mana used to fill a duchy’s land. Using them in tandem with black weapons to drain Ehrenfest would make it easier for Georgine to steal its foundation.”

Stealing mana from a duchy’s land was equivalent to sucking it straight out of the foundation. I’d suspected that this would only inconvenience Georgine, but the chalices explained everything—once she was the new aub, Old Werkestock’s giebes would simply return the mana they’d stolen, becoming giebes and nobles of Ehrenfest in the process. They even intended to move the citizens of their original provinces here.

“The land of an aubless duchy cannot be filled, no matter how much mana is poured into it!” shouted the now restrained giebe. “Do you understand the frustration and emptiness that comes of pointlessly dedicating one’s mana—to have the people who survive on your tireless work do nothing but complain? A new aub in Ahrensbach will not save Werkestock. We may wear Ahrensbach capes, but we are a separate duchy. The barrier we live behind makes that clear.”

If a duchy ran out of mana, its people would starve—that was the problem Old Werkestock was faced with. No matter how much its giebes begged the aub for assistance, their land was seen as a burden thrust upon the duchy by royal decree, and their needs were always put below those of Ahrensbach proper. Their only solution was to secure an aub of their own, but without the Grutrissheit, the royal family could not send them one or open the foundation.

“Who can blame us for abandoning Werkestock?” the giebe continued. “The royal family threw us aside long ago, and there is no chance of us receiving a new aub. Lady Georgine gave us hope!”

I cast my eyes down. They had only acted to save their people, but that didn’t mean I could excuse them.

“You invaded another duchy and stole its mana, all while wearing Ahrensbach capes. I am sure you had your reasons, but as the new Aub Ahrensbach, I cannot overlook such a grave crime. Knights, move them to Bindewald’s summer estate.”

“At once, Aub Ahrensbach!” The knights saluted and then sprang into action.

“Retrieve as many chalices as Old Werkestock’s giebess have with them. Do not let them be taken anywhere else; the mana inside belongs to Ehrenfest.”

“Understood!”

Georgine had given the giebess empty chalices and exploited their desperation to make it easier for her to steal the foundation. Even if we didn’t yet know the full extent of her scheme, there was no mistaking her intelligence. I almost wanted to applaud her.

“Stay focused, Rozemyne,” Ferdinand said. “By stealing mana on such a large scale, Georgine has forced Ehrenfest to deploy knights here and in Illgner. Assuming her plan was to weaken the guard around the Noble’s Quarter, she must be close to the city of Ehrenfest or already within its walls.”

I snapped to attention, the faces of my lower-city family and everyone in the temple flashing through my mind. Ferdinand must have noticed how desperately I wanted to rush to their aid because he shook his head and pointed to the battlefield.

“You cannot leave until our battle here is over; it is your duty as Aub Ahrensbach to capture the nobles of Old Werkestock. We will also need Sylvester’s permission to enter the city. Because your medal remains here in Ehrenfest, you could technically enter without his authorization, but neither I nor Dunkelfelger’s knights would be able to join you.”

This was but a taste of the many changes Ferdinand needed to face now that he was being treated as a member of another duchy. He was still only engaged, yet he wouldn’t even be able to enter his own estate without the archduke’s permission. Anyone in his position would struggle to think of Ehrenfest as their home.

No matter what happens, I need to end this battle and get Ferdinand back where he belongs.

As I was steeling my resolve, a white bird approached us from one of the knights keeping watch in the sky. “Lord Ferdinand, the platoons that received ordonnances are now moving to reunite with their primary force. If we allow this to happen, Giebe Gerlach’s

army might be crushed all at once.”

“Then there is not much time,” Ferdinand muttered just as a second ordonnanz arrived. This one flew over to me.

“Lady Rozemyne, this is Matthias. The traps on one of the cabins have been disarmed. There is no mistaking that Grausam is here.”

“He disarmed traps set by Bonifatius...?” Ferdinand muttered, a serious look on his face. “Grausam may be a more challenging foe than I expected.”

I suddenly felt a knot in my stomach. The traps put in place by Matthias and Bonifatius couldn’t have been easy to break.

“Rozemyne, have Matthias come back to us,” Ferdinand said.

I sent an ordonnanz to Matthias and Laurenz, relaying that instruction, and another white bird arrived as if to take its place.

“Lord Ferdinand, Dunkelfelger has eliminated another platoon.”

“Good,” he replied. “Strahl, oversee the prisoners’ transportation. Rozemyne, once you have retrieved the chalices, break through Old Werkestock’s forces and unite with Giebe Gerlach’s knights. Even if you are attacked, do not poke your head or hands out of your highbeast or lose focus on your objective.”

“I will do my best.”

Gong... Gong...

Fourth bell rang out from Giebe Gerlach’s estate—our destination—and we took to the skies as if on cue.

Epilogue

Georgine had arrived at the Bindewald estate, a prime location for her to take stock of things. Not only did the province border Ehrenfest's Gerlach, but it had also been in decline ever since its previous giebe's imprisonment for attacking Rozemyne. Its residents thus harbored a profound grudge against Ehrenfest and its archducal family—a weakness that made them easy to exploit.

It was during her short stay at the giebe's estate that Georgine received an ordonnanz from Detlinde. Their plans seemed to be proceeding smoothly.

"Did Lady Detlinde succeed?" asked Seltier, an attendant.

"Yes," Georgine replied with a nod. "I thought we would need to wait another few days, but Lady Letizia must have reached her limits sooner than I expected."

Georgine had predicted that Letizia would start to panic when her precious head attendant, Roswitha, disappeared without a trace. She had also guessed that the girl would turn to Ferdinand when her retainers' search came up empty. Seeking help from Georgine or Detlinde certainly wouldn't have been an option for her; they were of opposing factions, and she had barely even socialized with them.

But alas, not even Lord Ferdinand would agree to help her.

Ferdinand was a member of Ehrenfest's archducal family. He was also Georgine's half-brother, but as she had already been married out of the duchy by the time of his baptism, the two barely had a relationship to speak of. They had exchanged greetings and attended meals and meetings together since his arrival in Ahrensbach, but those were matters of business; they could hardly be described as socializing.

Still, he is much easier to read than Detlinde or Sylvester.

Through her research, Georgine had deduced that Ferdinand was the kind of man who could make exceedingly cold decisions when necessary. It was a trait they shared—maybe because their minds were wired similarly or because they had both grown up having everything they cared about taken from them by Veronica—

which was how she had determined that Ferdinand would tell the frantic Letizia to give up on Roswitha. In his shoes, she would have said exactly the same thing.

Georgine had also predicted that being turned away by Ferdinand, the last person she could rely on, would make Letizia desperate enough to use Leonzio's silver tube under the influence of a trug-infused sweet. To coax her into going along with their scheme, he had needed only say that ordonnances were still reaching Roswitha and that Letizia could secure her mentor's help by using the device he had given her. She would never have given up knowing that her head attendant was still alive.

Head attendants normally started serving their archduke candidate charges before the latter were even baptized. They were seen as a second mother of sorts, especially in the case of someone like Letizia, who had moved to Ahrensbach from Drewanchel. Georgine understood all too well how much an archduke candidate relocated to the northern building would come to rely on her head attendant; she still remembered the crippling terror she had felt when her own one was stolen away from her.

"Things proceeded even more simply than we anticipated," Grausam said, his brow furrowed as he touched his prosthetic left hand. "Lady Letizia must not have a very keen nose for danger. Or are Lord Ferdinand's teachings to blame?"

"Her shortcomings were likely the result of being locked away in the northern building so that we could not socialize with her. Bear in mind that her isolation was not her own doing—rather than sensing the threats around her and making an educated decision, she merely followed the instructions given to her. As secluded as she might have felt, it should come as no surprise that she never grew wary."

"I thought she would resemble you, Lady Georgine, since neither one of you has a mother to rely on, but I see now that I was mistaken. I might have been overestimating her..."

Georgine's lips curved into a slight grin. "You would do well not to paint with such broad strokes. It seems unwise to compare someone who does not have a mother to someone who does but expects her only to cause harm."

Even now, Georgine saw her parents as agents of malice who had played a personal and very deliberate role in her misery. She had wished for their deaths on countless occasions. Her retainers

and name-sworn were far more reliable.

“Furthermore, it was by a royal decree that Lady Letizia was assigned to become the next Aub Ahrensbach,” Georgine continued. “Her position was unshakable, so why would she have noticed the dangers around her? Do not forget all the work I put into keeping her oblivious.”

They weren’t from the same faction, but Georgine had always shown Letizia respect during social events. She had also fed Detlinde the most indirect, ineffective means of expressing her spite for the girl, preventing any acts of open aggression. Thus, in the eyes of Letizia and her retainers, Georgine had seemed relatively harmless. Only when they were in her presence and their political rivalry became more apparent had they acted cautiously.

Open malice is best saved for when one is about to land the final blow.

By that same logic, Ferdinand was a far more dangerous opponent. Georgine had spent more than a year trying to lower his guard with smiles and other such niceties, but he had never given her an opening. They each knew that the other would go for the jugular as soon as an opportunity arose.

“Lady Letizia is too close to her retainers,” Georgine said. “I sincerely doubt she has the guts to drop them all when the need arises; foolish reluctance is a common theme among coddled archduke candidates.”

Georgine’s thoughts turned to Sylvester and the many ways he had allowed his love for his family to poison his rule. Her eyes narrowed ever so slightly beneath her veil.

“Lord Ferdinand is dead, and Lady Letizia is being moved onto a Lanzenavian ship...” she mused. “Still, I never thought this would all take place inside the Mana Replenishment hall.”

As a general rule, bringing unnecessary items into the replenishment hall was forbidden; the fact that only registered archduke candidates could enter had made it the scene of many a tragedy during battles for the archduke’s seat. Georgine had expected Ferdinand and Letizia’s discussion to take place in one of their rooms instead.

My hope was that we could wipe out their retainers at the same time.

Because the silver tube had been used inside the replenishment hall, Ferdinand had been the only victim; Eckhart and Justus

weren't even capable of entering the archduke's office, so it stood to reason that they hadn't been poisoned alongside him. To make matters worse, Detlinde was the only one able to confirm and report on the situation. As much as Georgine wanted to hear from someone who could actually be trusted, she had no other options for the time being.

"Still, I must not undermine the death of such a capable opponent," she concluded. "I expected the overcautious Lord Ferdinand to be our hardest foe to eliminate."

The man had once served as an assistant to Sylvester and continued to socialize with Ehrenfest even after moving to another duchy. He had been in a prime position to leak Ahrensbach's intelligence, which had made him a most troublesome figure indeed. He had also come first-in-class each year he attended the Royal Academy and sorted out Ahrensbach's disastrous administrative situation without a single complaint. Georgine had desperately wanted to get him out of the picture before making her move.

"His troublesome retainers remain, but let us advance to the next stage of our scheme nonetheless," she said. "I wonder, will Eckhart and Justus reach Sylvester before his foundation ends up in my hands?"

"We have control over the border gate, and neither their letters nor their ordonnances will make it into Ehrenfest," Grausam replied. "Perhaps they could reach him by highbeast, but it would take them two days to journey from Ahrensbach's castle to the border gate. Then it would take them another day to reach Ehrenfest's castle—and that doesn't even account for the fact that our troops would stall them at the gate. There are no other options open to them, as they cannot pass through the barrier without silver cloth. Lord Sylvester will not receive a word about your plans."



Ordonnanzes were unable to cross duchy borders. Maybe the retainers would send one to Ahrensbach's side of the border gate, hoping they would relay the information to Ehrenfest, but Georgine's faction was already in control of the knights stationed there. A magic letter would prove just as futile—they were always checked at the border gate, which deterred senders from writing anything of critical importance, and there was no guarantee that the knight tasked with reviewing it wouldn't simply throw it away—and the teleporter to the Royal Academy couldn't be used without the aub's permission. Indeed, they could rely only on their highbeasts, which gave Georgine's group the advantage.

"Now that Lord Ferdinand is gone, I suppose Lord Bonifatius is our primary threat within Ehrenfest's archducal family..." Georgine mused.

"I concur," Grausam said with a frown. "We will need to draw him away from the castle. He rarely acts as one expects."

Georgine gave a wry smile of agreement; Bonifatius thwarted traps as effortlessly as he breathed, and his existence alone seemed to unravel even the most devious plots. It made no sense—anytime he was asked *how* he was able to detect such things, he would say only that he followed his instincts. He was anathema to people like Georgine and Grausam, who planned every last detail of their schemes before following them to the letter. Not to mention, he was a one-man army—a direct battle against him would surely end in disaster for his opponent. That was why they had devised the perfect countermeasure.

"If we first invade Illgner," Georgine began, "the giebe there will request aid to supplement his mediocre army. Ehrenfest's knight commander will need to stay at the castle, so we can expect Lord Bonifatius to join the fight instead. Then, after a pause, we will mount a simultaneous attack on Gerlach, forcing Aub Ehrenfest to divide his Knight's Order between the two border provinces."

A day or two after drawing Bonifatius to Illgner in the southwest, Georgine and Grausam would cause a disturbance in Gerlach in the southeast. Considering how long it took to move between the two provinces by highbeast, that would buy them more than enough time.

"The giebes of Old Werkestock are rather easy to manipulate,"

Georgine continued. “We can trust them to perform excellently in Ehrenfest.”

The giebes ruled territories so deprived of mana that they could not grow their own food. They cared sincerely about their people, and that was precisely what made them so easy to take advantage of—the current Zent’s inability to redraw borders had put them in such dire straits that they had no choice but to cooperate.

“And as a result of my endeavors, we now have means of resisting Lord Bonifatius,” Grausam said, stroking his prosthetic hand once again.

“The depth of your loyalty makes me proud,” Georgine said with a smile. “Let us obtain Ehrenfest’s foundation together. This time, we will not fail.”

“The commoners made it clear that Ehrenfest’s giebes have been reinforcing their defenses. I expect their castle and Noble’s Quarter are just as well protected. May Angriff guide you.”

Georgine sent directions to the diversion squads due to accompany her, then put on silver clothes and a cape to stop anyone from detecting her mana. Commoners from Bindewald were driving her and the others’ carriages, as well as the carriage containing leather pouches and crates packed with the magic tools she would need.

Using her silver attire, Georgine passed through the duchy barrier and into Gerlach. There she moved into another carriage that would take her to Leisegang. Her driver this time was Laugo, a Devouring victim whom Grausam had ordered to hide among the commoners. He normally spent his days as a merchant, trading in plants meant for dyes and medicine, and would use his connections to get Georgine’s group on boats to the city of Ehrenfest.

The caravan paused their journey to spend a night at an inn before continuing into Leisegang the next day. Then, Georgine’s diversion squads were spread across a number of merchant vessels. It was a discreet method of transportation but also a slow one, as the boats would need to pick up and unload cargo along the way.

“The last of the merchant vessels should arrive at the west gate in two days at fourth bell,” Laugo explained. “Your boat will not depart until tomorrow, but because it will travel straight to Ehrenfest, you can expect to arrive at third bell instead.”

Georgine and her attendant Seltier stayed in Leisegang

overnight, disguised as Laugo's servants, and then boarded their boat as planned.

"The two of you will share this room," Laugo said, speaking authoritatively to avoid arousing the suspicion of those around them. "I'll come tell you when we reach Ehrenfest. Don't go wandering about before then."

As narrow as it was, the room would serve as the perfect location for the pair to relax away from prying eyes. Nobody had realized they were nobles—and with that in mind, Georgine gave her attendant a satisfied nod.

"This is a reward from your master," Seltier said quietly before holding out a black feystone for Laugo to take. The mana within him must have been close to bursting out, because he immediately squeezed the feystone and heaved a heavy sigh of relief. "You must not have found many chances to ease the heat inside of you since the new giebe was assigned. We promised you only the one feystone, but rest assured, once our ship arrives at its destination, we shall give you another. Consider it a show of appreciation for your continued service."

Grausam's losing his position as giebe and moving to Ahrensbach had cost his Devouring servants all means of safely releasing their mana, more or less dooming them to an untimely demise. Now, however, Laugo was being offered not just another black feystone but also a connection that would benefit him long into the future. The feeling that his death might not be so certain anymore was indescribable, and he knelt before the compassionately smiling noblewomen in complete reverence.

Georgine accepted the gesture without question—it was only natural that someone would take a knee before her—and started shoing Laugo out of the room. "We shall remain here as advised. Be sure to keep up our little act."

Once the Devouring victim was gone, there was nothing for the two noblewomen to do but await their destination. As an attendant, Seltier strove to ensure that her lady was as comfortable as possible within their inconvenient commoner vessel. Georgine, meanwhile, had nothing but free time. Perhaps because she was back in Ehrenfest, memories of the past came and went as she swayed along with the boat.

I don't have a single good memory about this duchy...

Both now and in the past, Georgine had only ever felt alive

when she was striving to become Aub Ehrenfest.

“Georgine—I want *you* to become the next Aub Ehrenfest.”

Georgine’s first, oldest memory was a conversation with her mother, Veronica. The woman was a strict parent who demanded perfection in all things, and she had made it abundantly clear that she didn’t want her daughter to lose the archducal seat to Bonifatius’s son, Karstedt, who was receiving an archduke candidate’s education. Under her cold tutelage, Georgine had learned to read and write with tears in her eyes, repeated greetings until she could no longer speak, and memorized etiquette while receiving steady beatings.

“You *are* going to become the next aub and save me, aren’t you?” her mother had asked, sadness in her eyes.

In response, Georgine had made a personal vow to work even harder to save her poor mother from the abuse of other nobles.

“Another girl...” Veronica had moaned when Georgine’s younger sister, Constanze, was born. She hadn’t even attempted to hide her disappointment and immediately neglected the poor girl.

As her concern for her abandoned sister grew, Georgine tried to give the child the same education she had received. But the harder she tried to bridge the gap between them, the greater it became. Georgine hadn’t understood why at the time, but now she knew that an archduke candidate’s education was much too harsh for someone without a hope of ever taking the role. The adults had simply allowed the misunderstanding to fester, not wanting Georgine to realize that her own education was much too strict.

In any case, although Georgine’s education was harsh and painful, she got support from those around her. She received praise from her mother whenever she did well and, upon her entrance into adolescence, protection from Rihyarda when Veronica became too strict. She was also loved unconditionally by her Uncle Bezewanst, even though their chances to see one another were few and far between.

Georgine innocently believed that as long as she beat Karstedt to the archducal seat, her mother would give her the warmth she so desired.

But then Sylvester was born.

In the blink of an eye, Veronica changed. She rejoiced over finally having a son, directing her love and attention exclusively at

him. It didn't matter how much he wailed or how little he tried; he was put first purely because he was a boy.

Georgine was confused. Her entire world was falling apart because of the birth of her younger brother. She began to worry that no amount of work would ever secure her the adoration she craved and even considered the change in her mother abnormal and disgusting.

If only Sylvester had never been born.

Karstedt had been a good rival for Georgine; despite having the advantage in both age and gender, he was the grandson of the previous archduke, not the son of the current one—a temporary candidate put in place to compensate for the reigning aub's lack of a male heir. It would have been a close race between him and Georgine, the archduke's actual daughter.

Georgine hadn't been baptized at the time, so she'd rarely spoken with Karstedt face-to-face. They had a common tutor in Rihyarda, however, so information about him had been easy to come by. Georgine had considered beating him her long-term goal; he had been a rival she stood a chance of defeating with enough hard work.

But the first wife's son, Sylvester, had forced Karstedt out of the battle for the archducal seat simply by being born. Georgine had witnessed a fellow archduke candidate be reduced to the status of an archnoble before her very eyes; it was only natural that she feared she would be next.

And this is only happening because of Sylvester...

Despite her alarm, things didn't go as Georgine feared. Veronica's main focus was putting one of her children in power, so while she got rid of Karstedt, Georgine was ultimately spared.

Like his father, Sylvester was sickly at birth. Thus, once Karstedt had been deposed, some began to fear for Ehrenfest's future and pushed Georgine to continue her archducal education after her baptism.

So now Sylvester is my rival... I'll need to study hard.

But no sooner had Georgine resolved not to lose to anyone than her head attendant, Rihyarda, was stolen away from her. It happened prior to Georgine's baptism, partway through her move to the northern building. Veronica trusted Rihyarda more than any other attendant, so she transferred her to Sylvester, her ideal next aub.

Head attendants were generally seen as second mothers, but Georgine received far more love from Rihyarda than from Veronica. Having her most trusted retainer stolen away right when she was about to live separately from her parents seemed unforgivable. She cried to her mother that it was a terrible betrayal, but Veronica didn't care.

"You are healthy enough, Georgine. Sylvester, on the other hand, is terribly unwell. I cannot leave him with someone I do not trust."

Veronica convinced her husband to agree, and with that, Rihyarda formally became Sylvester's retainer. Everything was moving in the boy's favor. *Everything.*

I wish Sylvester would just die.

For the very first time, Georgine had the urge to dispatch her younger brother. *He* was the reason for all the unpleasant things in her life. His gender was the only advantage he had over her, yet it had been enough for him to gradually steal everything. It came as no surprise that she didn't feel at all attached to him.

Once her baptism was over, Georgine finished moving to the northern building. Her education as an archduke candidate truly began, and she was so busy that she visited the main building only once a month to have tea with her mother and report on her progress.

Sylvester grew taller and healthier with each visit. He troubled the attendants with pranks and received frequent scoldings from Rihyarda, yet Veronica still seemed to think of him as a sickly child and never stopped doting on him. Georgine hadn't been able to believe her eyes when she saw her mother actively stop others from punishing the boy. If *she* had dared to act out, she would have been screamed at and beaten.

Why should Sylvester be the aub at all...?

He only ever pulled pranks and messed around. Even when Georgine scolded him and said that he needed to work hard, he would shout that he didn't want to rule in the first place. Then he would cling to his mother in tears, and she would criticize Georgine without hesitation.

"Do *not* damage poor Sylvester's motivation," she would say. "The boy's still young. He doesn't *need* to work hard yet." There had even been a time when she had snapped, "You never dote on your little brother. All you ever do is complain. There is not enough love

in you.”

Georgine was speechless. If everything Veronica had said about Sylvester was true, then why had she meticulously listed every single one of Karstedt’s flaws when he was the same age and still an archduke candidate? Every time Georgine had gone to the dinner table to say her good-nights, Veronica had been criticizing him without mercy.

In any case, not once since Sylvester’s birth had Georgine felt anything resembling love for him. Her mother had said she didn’t have “enough” in her, but the truth of the matter was that she didn’t have any at all.

Each time she was scolded, Georgine would be forced to apologize to her younger brother. And when she eventually did, he would stick out his tongue and pull a nasty face. It was the expression of a spoiled brat who knew he was monopolizing their mother’s love and that he would never be chided.

Would it not be in Ehrenfest’s best interest for this rotten child to die?

Georgine had to wonder: was this boy really a fellow archduke candidate? Each time they interacted, her disdain for him grew. Her one and only comfort was knowing that their situation couldn’t last forever—that her parents would one day realize that such a base fool could never serve as the aub.

I must keep working hard for when that time comes.

And so Georgine continued with her studies, working as passionately as she could in the hope that everyone would recognize her.

It eventually came time for Georgine to attend the Royal Academy... and that was when her struggles reached a climax. She was suddenly forbidden from meeting with her Uncle Bezewanst, the High Bishop—the man who showed her more love than anyone. And to make matters worse, Veronica had refused to give her any of the retainers she had desired, declaring that she wanted them to serve Sylvester instead.

Faced with this awful turn of events, Georgine almost had a breakdown. Her only remaining comfort—the one place she could truly feel safe—had now been stolen from her, and she wasn’t even allowed to choose the retainers who would support her in the future.

Why? Why won’t Sylvester just die?

Georgine's relationship with her mother continued to deteriorate, but her father recognized how hard she had been working. He knew that, as a woman, she would need to take a husband from an archducal family to stand a chance of becoming the aub, so he arranged her engagement to an archduke candidate from another duchy and made sure that her husband-to-be would marry into Ehrenfest. It was her father's support that allowed Georgine to continue striving to rule, even when she was driven into a corner time and time again.

Then came the day of Sylvester's baptism when, once again, Georgine's plans were turned on their head. The event had taken place during the spring feast to match the boy's birth season, so the duchy's entire noble population had been present when Veronica proclaimed it "the baptism of Ehrenfest's next aub."

Georgine had pleaded with her father, the current aub, to take back the announcement; unless they acted with great haste, the giebels would take the misunderstanding back to their provinces. Veronica's rogue declaration would take root, making it all the harder to dispute.

In response, Georgine's father shook his head. "The archducal couple cannot make contrasting declarations in front of the duchy's nobles. I will speak with Veronica privately and then deal with the misinformation."

Well, Father does have a reputation to uphold...

An archduke's reputation was his lifeblood, so Georgine accepted her father's response and stood down—a choice she would quickly come to regret. The nobles returned home under the impression that Sylvester was indeed the duchy's next archduke, and come the next academic term, Georgine's fiancé delivered a devastating blow.

"I was told you are no longer in the running to become the next Aub Ehrenfest. That violates the terms of our engagement."

Georgine begged her parents to save her marriage—to reveal the truth about Sylvester's position to her future husband. But instead, they elected to dissolve it.

"Sylvester is guaranteed to become the next aub, so why should your husband need to marry into Ehrenfest?" Veronica asked with a smile. "You should look for a partner from a higher-ranked duchy instead."

"You are a smart and talented girl, Georgine," her father added.

"I want you to support Sylvester when he becomes the next aub. He needs someone like my elder brother to keep him on the straight and narrow. To that end, you could even just marry an archnoble."

The world around Georgine began to crumble. How could her parents say such cruel things without the slightest hint of remorse? Looking back, it was hard to say how long she had spent frozen in place before realizing the truth—that she would never be given a chance to rule, that she was only being allowed to continue her archducal education so she could support Sylvester, and that her life's work had essentially been cast aside and spat on. As soon as the pieces fell into place, though, she became so consumed by rage and despair that her eyes became hollow and her face entirely devoid of emotion.

Do they seriously intend to put the fate of our duchy in the hands of a fool who refuses to work even now that he is baptized? How will they keep Ehrenfest together when its aub has no motivation to speak of? Am I not good enough? Did my hard work mean nothing to them? I did not endure such a brutal education for Sylvester's sake. I thought Father was supporting me, but was that merely an illusion?

Georgine started grinding her teeth, well aware that if she started screaming at her parents now, she would never stop. She balled her hands into such tight fists that her nails dug into her palms; it was all she could do not to take out her schtappe and unleash the fury writhing about within her.

"It was all for nothing..." she said to her retainers.

"That simply isn't true, Lady Georgine. In a just world, *you* would have been the next aub. You worked more than hard enough to deserve it. We must obey the archducal couple's decree that Lord Sylvester will take over as the archduke, but we will not accept his rule if we decide he is unworthy of your support."

Georgine's retainers took their lady's side and suggested that she educate Sylvester into a deserving aub. It certainly was true that she would refuse to support him in his current state. To begin with, he didn't want to work hard even now that he had moved into the northern building. His retainers could always be seen chasing after him, and not a single day went by when Rihyarda's furious shouts didn't resound throughout the corridors.

Thus, Georgine decided to give Sylvester the same education she had received from Veronica. It was much easier said than done; he bolted out of the room at every chance he got, and when forced

to sit down, he would wail and refuse to even look at his work.

"I don't even want to be the next aub!" he protested. "If you care about the role so much, Sister, why don't *you* rule?! It means nothing to me!"

Then die, brat.

At last, something inside of Georgine snapped. She wanted nothing more than to kill her younger brother, who had seized the archducal seat she so desperately wanted without even trying—who had taken absolutely everything from her without a care in the world.

"That boy is not worthy of your support, Lady Georgine," said Grausam, one of her retainers. "In fact, Ehrenfest would benefit from having him eliminated. If anyone should rule, it should be you."

"That may be so, but my parents have made their decision. What more can I do?"

"You could expose his ignorance to the duchy's nobles and flaunt your competence in the same breath. But first, you would need an unshakable foothold and trustworthy allies."

Grausam went on to explain what name stones were before offering Georgine his own. Veronica had apparently demanded them from many of her supporters, stating that she wouldn't be able to trust them otherwise.

"If your honest work is going unrewarded, let us learn from Lady Veronica's methods," he continued. "She married the current archduke to become the duchy's first wife, strengthened her position with staunch, reliable allies, and started eliminating those who opposed her one by one."

Veronica had mentioned on many an occasion that she had been scorned and abused by the Leisegangs from a young age. If one looked at the current balance of power, however, she was in an ideal position to get her revenge.

"The children and grandchildren of the retainers Lady Gabriele brought with her when marrying into Ehrenfest are expected to give their names to Lady Veronica," Grausam explained. "I expect that once Lord Sylvester enters the Royal Academy and acquires a schtappe, she will expect everyone to make that vow to him. You should obtain their names first, thereby securing allies who will never be able to oppose you."

It was a splendid idea. Still reeling from the loss of Rihyarda,

Georgine desperately wanted retainers who could serve her without having to worry about them being stolen by Sylvester.

“Using my mother as an example, hm...?” she uttered. “Neither she nor Father could scold me for doing that.”

But first, I'll need to learn more about the medicinal arts.

So that was what Georgine did. Back at the Royal Academy, she decided to join the scholar course as well as the archduke candidate course, deliberately taking as many classes about medicine as she could. Then, as her expertise grew, she spread information about Sylvester's foolish behavior among the other nobles, sowing seeds of uncertainty about him, the archducal couple, and even Ehrenfest's future.

At the same time, Georgine asked everyone descended from Gabriele's retainers to give her their names, taking a particular interest in those who were her age. She knew from Grausam's probing that some were hesitant to give their names to Veronica, fearing her advanced age, so she persuaded them to serve her instead. It certainly helped that Sylvester was continuously embarrassing himself during social gatherings.

“I shall be the next aub,” the slighted young woman declared. “That child cannot be trusted to rule.”

But as Georgine continued to secure more power behind the scenes, she received a summons from her father. He criticized her decision to start poaching names and the lack of support she gave Sylvester, then said that he could no longer trust her to remain in Ehrenfest as his ally. To that end, he ordered her to marry Aub Ahrensbach.

“I do not want to,” Georgine protested. “Why should *I* need to settle for being a third wife in another duchy?!”

“Be silent,” Veronica said. “You should feel blessed to be marrying into a greater duchy such as Ahrensbach. Because of the arrangements I made with our relatives, you have this excellent opportunity to enter its archducal family. I expect you to thank me, if nothing else.”

Thank you?! For what?!

First, Georgine's family had disregarded the immense amount of work she had put into becoming the next Aub Ehrenfest. And now that she was finally taking matters into her own hands, she was being made to move to another duchy to marry a man about as old as her father. She would spend her days as a mere third wife,

existing only for the sake of nighttime activities. How could she accept that? Greater duchy or no, third wives were forbidden from involving themselves in politics and thus had no power to speak of.

I worked so hard to become Ehrenfest's next aub.

But the engagement was set in stone; Georgine's father had already agreed to it. Ehrenfest saw her continued education as an archduke candidate as actively harmful to the duchy and wanted to curb her aspirations once and for all.

Georgine was so overcome with humiliation and rage that she feared she might lose her mind.

"Mother. Father. I'm going to marry Lady Florencia of Frenbeltaag!"

Sylvester had developed mana-sensing during his second year at the Royal Academy and fallen madly in love with an archduke candidate two years his senior. It was yet another foolish development, Georgine thought. Marriages existed as a means of strengthening the bonds between territories, and their sister, Constanze, already had an engagement with Frenbeltaag. There was no point in Sylvester taking a wife from the same duchy.

"She's the daughter of a third wife, whereas I'm the next Aub Ehrenfest," he continued. "Frenbeltaag won't be able to refuse! I won't marry anyone but her!"

Georgine's first engagement had been overturned by her parents. She had pleaded with them to reconsider, but they had shut her down nonetheless. Now she was due to become the third wife of a man as old as her father. She had said that she didn't want to marry him, but her protests had immediately been quashed. Was it not unfair, then, that Sylvester could take a wife of his choosing? How could their father permit him to enter a marriage that wouldn't benefit the duchy?

Sylvester had always neglected his archducal education and complained that he didn't even want to rule, but now he was proclaiming himself the next aub of Ehrenfest. It was a shameless, unforgivable display meant only to secure him what he wanted.

The time has come. Sylvester must be stopped. How did my mother eliminate those who tried to oppose her, I wonder?

Georgine didn't care about the consequences; her move to Ahrensbach had already been decided. Thus, she asked one of her name-sworn attendants to mix poison into Sylvester's food—the

same poison her mother had used so many times before.

“Guh...!”

Partway through dinner, Sylvester spat out his food and fell out of his chair. His parents’ eyes shot open at the unexpected development. Georgine was just as surprised; her plan had worked even more easily than she’d expected.

“Sylvester?!” Veronica exclaimed.

Georgine took great pleasure in her mother’s horror. How could the vile woman act so surprised when she had used the same method to assassinate so many of her foes? Her dearest son would die before her very eyes, sending her into the deepest, darkest depths of despair.

“Ngh... Gah!”

Seeing her younger brother clutch his throat and continue to choke made Georgine feel... *elated*. Rarely did she experience such pleasant emotions. She hoped to watch him struggle for a little while longer before he eventually slipped away.

But the brat survived.

Veronica had been too stunned to move, but her attendant had sprung into action and calmly administered an antidote to the dying Sylvester, saving him. Georgine’s hard work had once again come to naught, dooming her to an empty future in another duchy.

The day of Georgine’s marriage came and went, and she spent her days in Ahrensbach simply waiting to die. She had considered trying to seize power in her new home, but she took so little interest in the duchy that the thought had quickly lost its appeal. Her time was spent doing absolutely nothing of value.

Hm... Perhaps I could derive some amusement from becoming the first wife and standing over Sylvester during future Archduke Conferences.

This idea had come to Georgine out of the blue, and she immediately began plotting to make it happen. For once, her hard work bore fruit, and she secured enough authority to make Sylvester kneel... but not even that was particularly satisfying. Only by taking Ehrenfest would she finally be able to sate her hunger.

Georgine was despondent. Her dream was a hopeless one, she thought... but then she received the letters of her late Uncle Bezewanst, the former High Bishop of Ehrenfest.

“Lady Georgine, we are about to arrive,” Seltier announced,

drawing her lady back from her thoughts. “Is something the matter?”

“Oh, no. I was just thinking that I owe my uncle more than I could ever put into words.”

Following the merchant acting as their guide, Georgine and her attendant made their way out of the ship. Discussions among the commoners revealed that Bonifatius was en route to Illgner. They also mentioned that the soldiers at the west gate were on high alert and closely inspecting everyone who attempted to pass through.

Grausam’s plot is going well, then.

Bonifatius had yet to return, so it seemed reasonable to assume the city’s soldiers were still on guard. Georgine determined it best to avoid the gate entirely.

“That will be all,” Seltier told Laugo. “We appreciate your service.”

“Can I ask where you’re going?” the merchant replied, his eyes flitting nervously between them and the west gate.

At her lady’s signal, Seltier gave the man a black feystone. “We will not be passing through the gate. That is a good enough answer for you, I trust?”

Laugo must have recognized the feystone as a bribe; he responded only with a nod before taking his leave.

Still posing as mere servants, Georgine and Seltier blended in with the other servants unloading boxes from the docked ships. Anyone who saw them with their luggage assumed they were moving cargo, so they slipped away from the west gate without issue.

“This should be it,” the attendant said when they arrived outside the entrance to the city’s waterway. The infrastructure had been made with an *entwickeln*—like the rest of the lower city—and would allow them to access the temple without passing through the gate. She pulled out and opened a scroll depicting the tunnel system’s layout, drawn by one of Georgine’s name-sworn scholars.

“I doubt it even crossed their minds that I might resort to such means...” Georgine mused. Another short trek, and the prize she longed for would finally be within her reach.

The time has come for me to steal this duchy’s foundation and make it my own. At long last, Ehrenfest is going to be mine.

“I never thought this day would come...” Georgine said, so elated that her red lips curved into a grin.

Gong... Gong...

It was third bell, and the final battle was about to begin.

The Defense of Ehrenfest (First Half)

Giebe Kirnberger — The Activated Country Gate

Just before Spring Prayer, a white bird arrived at the Kirnberger summer estate. It flew into my office and turned into a letter, which then dropped onto my desk.

One of my scholars took a moment to inspect the message before passing it along to me. “Giebe Kirnberger, this is from the castle. It was sent by Lady Florencia.”

My brow furrowed, I started to read the correspondence. It warned that Lady Georgine of Ahrensbach was likely about to launch an invasion, hoping to steal our duchy’s foundation, and ordered me to prepare. If we encountered anyone suspicious, I was to report directly to the castle.

We were told to prepare ourselves at the very start of the season, but I see Lady Georgine has finally made her move.

I pondered the woman in question. After being told to become the next aub and undergoing an intense education, she had suddenly been taken out of the running during her younger brother’s baptism ceremony. Her relationship with her family had only continued to deteriorate ever since. Was her impending attack the result of a grudge from those days, or was there something else motivating her?

Several nobles name-sworn to Georgine had been executed during the purge last winter. She had originally sought their loyalty as a way of challenging Lady Veronica, but that was neither here nor there; she shouldn’t have had many pawns left in Ehrenfest.

“As perilous as this situation might be, I doubt Lady Georgine will involve Kirnberger,” I mused. She wanted to seize Ehrenfest’s foundation, so she would approach the Noble’s Quarter from Ahrensbach in the south or Old Werkestock in the southwest. There was no reason for her to bother a province on the duchy’s eastern border.

“Perhaps not, but we are ready for her if she does,” one of my

scholars said. "Shall we increase the number of patrolling knights and double up on training duty?"

"We could always send them to the giebels of provinces bordering Ahrensbach, should they request reinforcements."

"A decision like that should not be made lightly. There is no guarantee that Lady Georgine will not come here as well."

I nodded, stroking my chin. "Then perhaps we should prioritize lending troops to the Noble's Quarter. The foundation's safety is more important than anything else."

"Shall we contact Lord Alexis? His charge might need our support."

In other words, we would use my son's connections to curry favor with the current Aub Ehrenfest and his successor, Lord Wilfried. If we were going to send troops to another province, it made sense to help my boy at the same time. I sent him an ordonnanz, asking whether they needed our support.

"This is Alexis," he replied. "Has Lady Georgine invaded? Lord Wilfried is currently in a meeting with the rest of the archducal family and the heads of the Knight's Order, and we have yet to receive any updates. I will consult him as soon as he returns."

I crossed my arms as the ordonnanz repeated its message. Alexis was a guard knight serving the archducal family, so it surprised me that he wasn't yet abreast of the situation.

"Could the archducal family have learned something so urgent during their meeting that Lady Florencia decided to contact the duchy's giebels then and there?" I wondered aloud. "I suppose it could also be the case that Alexis was sworn to silence or deliberately kept out of the loop."

"It could also be the case that the aub needed to leave on urgent business, and the others are stuck in the meeting room, unable to continue without him. Perhaps they are doing what they can while awaiting his return."

A most scholarly observation, I thought. But in any case, it seemed clear to me that Lady Georgine's invasion was imminent.

"If nothing else," I said, "we should position our troops in anticipation of a request for aid."

I summoned the higher-ups of my Knight's Order and showed them Lady Florencia's letter. We were discussing our next course of action when another ordonnanz arrived, turned into a letter, and dropped onto my desk.

“What, does Alexis need our help already?” I asked.

“No, this is from Aub Ehrenfest.”

“But we heard from Lady Florencia only a moment ago. What reason could he have to contact us?”

It really hadn’t been long since we’d received our warning letter. I couldn’t even begin to imagine what the aub might want from Kirnberger in the context of an invasion.

“He plans to visit Kirnberger tonight,” my scholar announced. “To open the border gate.”

“The border gate?” I repeated. “For what reason?”

I snatched up the letter in disbelief, but my scholar was right. In simpler terms, the aub had written, “I will teleport to your estate tonight with my knights in tow and open your province’s border gate. You need not do anything in preparation; I only mean to warn you that we are going to use your estate.”

I smacked the paper with the back of my hand, bewildered. “How on earth does he intend to teleport here? Do we have a teleportation circle in this estate? If so, where? I would appreciate knowing where the aub is going to appear.”

“And despite what he said, we will need to make *some* preparations, surely. Let us make amendments to the night watch and search for this teleportation circle so that we can clear the area around it.”

We’d never used whatever teleportation circle the aub was referring to, so I didn’t have a clue where it might be. Maybe it was behind a blocked door or there were boxes stacked atop it. Everyone must have been thinking the same, as we were all pale-faced. The estates given to giebels were deceptively large, so our search would be anything but easy.

“Find that teleportation circle posthaste!” I ordered. “We need everything ready by tonight!”

“It’s probably carved into one of the walls or floors. And it might only be visible when it’s active.”

“Attendants, start searching rooms! Knights, search outside—and make sure to cover the training grounds! Scholars, search the shelves for any records of this teleportation circle!”

At once, the atmosphere in my estate became especially frantic. We had a mission to complete, and time was of the essence.

Our search revealed a teleporter carved into the stone floor of a

room now used as part of our province's training grounds. The circle linked to the Royal Academy could only move three people at once, but this one was so large that I wondered whether it was capable of transporting entire groups. The shelves and training dummies that had previously sat atop it were moved, and the knights used waschen to clean the room. We really had managed to finish our preparations in time.

"Is the aub truly coming?" one of the knights asked me.

"He went out of his way to warn us, so yes, I would assume so."

I wasn't sure *when* he would arrive—the letter had said only nighttime—so I took a short nap to renew my strength. Spring was already upon us, but the nights were still cold, so I watched the teleportation circle from my office with a guard of several knights.

As soon as the teleporter began to shine, we sprinted to the balcony and descended to the grounds on our highbeasts. Black and golden fire swirled above the circle, and we arrived just as figures started to appear within the maelstrom.

"Welcome, Aub Ehrenfest."

I greeted the archduke with a calm expression, but I was finding it hard to keep my surprise in check. He had arrived with some knights and one very unexpected young woman.

"Is that Lady Rozemyne...?" I muttered under my breath.

"I would think so, based on the guards she has with her," answered the knight beside me, sounding equally troubled.

The woman in question had grown so much that she was almost unrecognizable. Lady Rozemyne had missed the feast celebrating spring—apparently because of a fever—but I'd still seen her during the gathering the previous winter. Even if she had randomly hit a growth spurt, she had changed far too much in such a short time.

I was champing at the bit to learn what had caused such a sudden change in the woman before me, but Aub Ehrenfest and the knights launched straight into a discussion about the potential of teleportation circles. There was no room for me to ask about Lady Rozemyne's abnormal growth.

And what about those two? Did they not accompany Lord Ferdinand to Ahrensbach?

Lords Eckhart and Justus were among Lady Rozemyne's retainers. I crossed my arms, realizing that I'd just been pulled into something beyond my understanding.

“Should we not open the border gate?” Lady Rozemyne asked, interrupting the lively discussion about teleporters.

“Ah, right,” the aub replied. “Come on, then. This investigation can wait.”

As it turned out, *Lady Rozemyne* was the one who wanted the border gate open. She had grown into such a beautiful woman, but she still drove the same bizarre highbeast.

Hmm... It doesn't match her appearance at all.

I thought a more elegant highbeast would suit her now, but for some reason, she was still using the shape of a fat grun. For all its advantages—I remembered she'd used it when transporting her Gutenbergs—I thought it would do her well to pay more attention to appearances.

We mounted our highbeasts and took our guests to the border gate. It shone brightly enough in the moonlight that they would have been able to find it on their own, but I didn't feel comfortable leaving them to their own devices.

“There's Aub Ehrenfest...” said one of the night watchmen peering down at us from atop the border gate. “He actually came.”

I was especially curious to see why the archduke was here. We all watched as he made his schtappe, chanted, “*Oeffnetor*,” and then tapped the border gate. It slowly opened, revealing the second gate that sat behind it—a rare, majestic sight even for the people of our province. Its doors appeared to shine a variety of colors, and not just because of the moonlight.

As I gazed upon the newly revealed country gate, I saw Lady Rozemyne climb out of her highbeast. She formed her schtappe and said, “*Grutrissheit*,” which made it turn into a radiant tablet.

She has the Grutrissheit?!

My breath caught in my throat. Lady Rozemyne was holding a book meant only for the Zent. It must have been genuine, as the country gate wouldn't have opened for her otherwise.

“The gate's shining... Is this real...?”

“Then is that... the *Grutrissheit*?!”

“Is Lady Rozemyne...?”

Overcome with awe and unease, I couldn't look away from the gate, which had just been activated for the first time in about two hundred years. The same was true for my knights. I approached Aub Ehrenfest, who was also staring at the unexpected spectacle.

“Would the royal family not consider this treason?” I asked in a

low voice, remembering the events that had come before Eisenreich's destruction. That historic scheme to claim the throne had been the cause of Kirnberger's downfall, so seeing Lady Rozemyne with the Grutrissheit sent a shiver down my spine.

"You can rest easy—we have negotiated in secret for her to be adopted into the royal family. Not to mention, we have *this*."

The aub showed me a courtship necklace from the first prince and explained that the royal family knew Lady Rozemyne had the Grutrissheit. I was glad to know this wasn't an act of treason, but my eyes widened nonetheless. Rather than just becoming the king's adopted daughter and giving him the Grutrissheit, she was going to marry royalty. There was no future in which she returned to Ehrenfest.

Immense change would soon come to our duchy, I was sure. But while I was at a loss for words, Lady Rozemyne spared us not even a glance, instructing her retainers to get back in her highbeast.

"Well," she said, "I'm going. I *will* return with Ferdinand."

"Hold it, Rozemyne," the aub interjected. "Take this—I got it from Prince Sigiswald. He said to wear it no matter what to prove you're acting with the royal family's permission."

Aub Ehrenfest held out the courtship magic tool: a golden necklace embedded with feystones of six elements. Lady Rozemyne accepted it without any fuss, then climbed into her highbeast and entered the country gate through its opened roof. The aub and his knights followed suit.

I attempted to join them with my retinue, but a barrier kept us from getting too close to the gate.

Lady Rozemyne waved at us, then made her Grutrissheit shine and said, "*Kehrschluessel*. Dunkelfelger." The gate's teleportation circle rose into the air, shining with the light of every element, before starting to rotate. Then the magic circle beneath it activated as if spurred on by the light.

"Take care of Ferdinand for me, Rozemyne!" the aub shouted.

As soon as Lady Rozemyne was gone, the triangular roof started to close as though it knew its job was done. Something I'd only ever read about in history books was happening before my very eyes. My men rejoiced over the opening of the country gate and the mission to rescue Lord Ferdinand, but I couldn't help feeling bitter inside.

Lady Rozemyne's adoption into the royal family would allow her to give the Zent her Grutrissheit without being executed for

treason. It was ideal for her *and* for Yurgenschmidt.

I really wanted her to become the next Aub Ehrenfest, but I suppose that's out of the question now.

As a giebe, I considered that a great shame, but it wasn't my main concern; I was far more worried about how Ehrenfest and its archducal family would proceed once Lady Rozemyne was gone. For her to have accepted a courtship magic tool from the first prince, her engagement to Lord Wilfried must have been close to being canceled. I suspected that the archduke and other key figures had already spent a lot of time discussing their next moves behind closed doors.

But what about Lord Wilfried...? Surely he hasn't forgotten the black mark on his reputation. What does he intend to do once he's no longer engaged to Lady Rozemyne?

I watched the aub's back as he closed the border gate. He had been so obstinate about Lord Wilfried taking the archducal seat that he had disregarded a crime that would easily have warranted the boy's disinheritance and subsequently arranged his engagement to Lady Rozemyne. Alexis had told me that the young lord was no longer being trained as an archduke because of a falling-out with Lord Bonifatius, so losing his connection to Lady Rozemyne on top of that would make it nearly impossible for him to become the next aub.

I wonder, will Lord Wilfried remain a member of the archducal family? Does the royal family intend to give him a reparation payment of some kind to make up for their taking Lady Rozemyne away? How will this impact Alexis's future as his retainer?

Lady Rozemyne had used the Grutrisheit to open a country gate and then teleported to another duchy to fight a war. It would without a doubt be considered a momentous turning point in the history of our duchy—but with neither her fiancé, Wilfried, nor his retainer Alexis here to witness it, I couldn't help but worry about their future.

That said, I didn't want to spoil the joy and enthusiasm everyone was feeling. I simply watched as the border gate closed, unable to demand any answers from the archduke.

Brigitte — Illgner's Battle

"Brigitte, this is Helfried. Could you come to my office?"

I cocked my head at the ordonnanz that had arrived for me. It had been quite a while since my brother, Giebe Illgner, had made such a request; my marriage to Viktor and the continued growth of the printing industry meant our province's noble population was growing steadily, and there was less of a need for me to make these visits. My last summons had been when we were sending a large package of fey paper to Lady Rozemyne.

"Has she asked for more?" I murmured.

My mother smiled and waved a hand at me; we had been embroidering together in the playroom. "It must be urgent for him to have sent you an ordonnanz. Let me watch over Lilaroze while you're gone."

I gazed upon my napping daughter while putting away my needles and thread. "Please do, Mother. I only hope she will continue to sleep peacefully..."

Leaving my eighteen-month-old daughter to my mother, I briskly made for my brother's office. He must have heard my footsteps because Volk, a former gray priest, stepped out to welcome me.

"My brother summoned me," I said. "Will you tell him I'm here?"

"Go on inside; he is already waiting for you."

Volk opened the door for me, so I continued into the giebe's office. My brother and my husband were inside, knitting their brows as they inspected a letter.

"You wished to see me?" I said.

"This is a message from Lady Florencia. It seems safe to assume that the other giebes received it as well."

I read the letter. It warned that Lady Georgine of Ahrensbach was most likely about to invade Ehrenfest in an attempt to steal its foundation and asked us to strengthen our watch. If we noticed anything suspicious, we were supposed to send a report to the castle.

"If you remember, we received similar orders at the start of the season," my brother said. "I was wondering how we should respond to them this time."

We were making rejuvenation potions in case a battle started, but Illgner had always been a province with very few knights; there wasn't much we could do to prepare for an invasion.

My brother continued, "The letter says that an attack is a

foregone conclusion, but I suspect we have little to be concerned about. Nobody who intends to steal our duchy's foundational magic would go out of their way to target Illgner."

Only a fraction of our province bordered Ahrensbach, and while the printing industry was steadily increasing our wealth, we didn't have much else that a would-be conqueror would want. We were also a fair distance from the castle and its foundation, and an attack on us would risk aggravating Frenbeltaag, with whom we shared most of our border.

"Not to mention, Aub Ehrenfest would notice if nobles from another duchy crossed the border," my brother continued. "Could we not just wait until we receive word that the invasion has begun?"

"For now, let us increase our watch as advised, focusing in particular on our border," I replied. "How about two passes, at noon and at night? I would rather not resort to such means, but we do not have a choice in the matter."

Ahrensbach's land was running out of mana, so its starving commoners often trespassed on our mountains to steal food. Increasing our guard along the border would require us to force them back.

"My heart goes out to the commoners, but our hands are tied," Volk said. "The aub might even chastise us for having overlooked them until now. Besides, their hunger problem is for Ahrensbach's temple and archducal family to solve, not us."

Volk had been raised in the temple, yet he was disregarding commoners without a second thought. My brother and I stared at him, shocked, but he just continued with a slight smile.

"It should come as no surprise that a change in the political climate would impact our relationship with the commoners of other duchies. For the sake of our province, we must not prioritize their needs over the archducal family's wishes. This might be a good time to start gathering intelligence from the merchants. Those who deal in lumber have an especially wide reach."

Volk and Viktor agreed that our best option right now was to simply strengthen our watch. Considering our natural inclination to put paper-making—our province's main source of income—above all else, we didn't want to spend potentially months on full alert, awaiting an invasion that wasn't even guaranteed to happen.

"Inform the kni— Oh? Another ordonnanz."

Before my brother could state his plans for the few knights Illgner had at its disposal, another white bird appeared. We all assumed it was for him, but it landed on my arm instead.

“This is Rozemyne.”

I stared intently at the ordonnanz. Lady Rozemyne must have recovered from her fever, which had rendered her too unwell to even attend the feast celebrating spring. I could tell from her voice alone that she was growing up—she sounded a lot more mature than I remembered.

“Lady Georgine has put Ferdinand on the brink of death and will most likely use this opportunity to begin her invasion,” the bird continued. “She has already moved to a location close to Ehrenfest; expect her to make a move of some kind either today or tomorrow.”

We all exchanged glances. Lady Georgine was already at our duchy’s border. The ordonnanz conveyed the severity of our situation in a way that Lady Florencia’s letter had not, and the tone with which Lady Rozemyne spoke made it clear that she was concerned about us. She even gave us instructions for the coming battle.

“Be especially careful of the silver cloth our enemies might be wearing—it is immune to mana, which includes schtappe weaponry and offensive magic tools. I would advise you to carry the same kind of weapons that your commoners use. There is also a high chance that the invaders will use powdered poison, so be sure to keep your mouths covered. Assuming that Lady Georgine’s group is moving in secret, they might be using carriages rather than highbeasts. Learn what you can of any suspicious nobles from the commoners and stay in close contact with the giebes around you. If you notice anything suspicious on the border, inform us straight away—my grandfather can mobilize the Knight’s Order at a moment’s notice.”

The ordonnanz repeated its message twice before turning back into a yellow feystone. All we could do was stare down at it.

“This threat to our duchy is nowhere near as distant as Lady Florencia’s letter made it seem...” Viktor muttered.

“We should start those patrols at once,” my brother added with a nod of agreement. “Lady Rozemyne said we can expect something either today or tomorrow.”

“I’ll start putting the knights through their paces,” I said. They had been preparing for battle since the start of the season, but I’d

taken a long break from training while I was pregnant and then spent most of my time since the birth caring for my newborn daughter. In other words, I was nowhere near as strong as I used to be.

Every knight would count in the impending battle to protect our province. To keep my family and our people safe, I would need to train as hard as I could.

“Brigitte—as much as I relate to your enthusiasm, send a few words of gratitude to Lady Rozemyne first,” my brother said. “She must have given you this information because you used to be her retainer. Years have passed since then, yet she still keeps you in her thoughts.”

He was right. Not wanting to waste another moment, I prepared to send an ordonnanz back. Thoughts of my time serving Lady Rozemyne came to mind unbidden, and the realization that we were connected even now made a pleasant warmth spread through my chest.

“Lady Rozemyne, this is Brigitte. Lady Florencia has already contacted the giebes, but I thank you ever so much for your more detailed explanation. It was of great value. I shall inform the giebes around us and the commoners so that they know to be fully on guard.”

Once the bird was gone, my brother placed several ordonnanz feystones in a line on his desk. “Brigitte, I must ask you to contact our neighbors. The gravity of the situation should come across more clearly if you speak to them as one of Lady Rozemyne’s former retainers.”

Lady Florencia’s letter had made the threat facing Ehrenfest seem well over the horizon, and a message from my brother wouldn’t do much to change that. A relayed warning from Lady Rozemyne, on the other hand, would surely spur the giebes into action.

I got straight to work sending ordonnanzes while the others began discussing our next moves. Lady Georgine’s attack could come at any moment, so there was much for us to consider.

“Gathering intelligence from the commoners is going to be important, but should we not first warn them against venturing into the mountains?” Viktor suggested. “We wouldn’t want them to cross paths with any invading knights.”

“We have enough food and shelter to last us several days in the

event of a siege,” Volk added. “Our next focus should be how to evacuate the commoners.”

My brother nodded. “We’ll tell them to avoid the mountains by the border until we know more about our situation. Something is bound to happen in the coming days.”

I sighed; they were all completely focused on the commoners. Yes, it was a giebe’s duty to protect his people, but the knights wouldn’t be able to mobilize until they were given orders.

“Brother, how we evacuate the commoners will depend on whether an entire army crosses the border or just a small squadron targeting the castle,” I said. “The same is true for our preparations and patrol paths.”

“I understand that, but we still don’t know how this invasion will take shape,” Viktor replied. He then turned to consult a map. “To begin with, we are so far out of the way. Our foes are far more likely to invade through Gerlach, Wiltord, Garduhn, or Griebel.”

It certainly was true that our province shared only a sliver of the Ahrensbach border. My brother agreed that Lady Georgine was unlikely to even touch us, but we couldn’t afford to take any chances.

“You may be right, Viktor, but Illgner has the fewest nobles and the lightest guard. Lady Georgine might know that—and if she does, she might intend to use our province as a decoy.”

“A decoy...?”

“Yes. As much as we can count on Lord Bonifatius’s aid if something happens, we don’t know how long it will take for the Knight’s Order to receive our call, obtain the aub’s permission, and deploy troops to our province.”

“Well said,” I replied. “And to make matters worse, no matter how fast they travel, it will take them at least a full day to reach us by highbeast. We will need to endure on our own until then.”

I’d regularly dealt with the Knight’s Order while serving Lady Rozemyne, so I understood its operation better than anyone else here. Moreover, the more I thought about it, the more likely it seemed that Lady Georgine would use us as a distraction.

Our warnings must have made sense to Viktor, because he quickly incorporated them into his plans: “If promptly detecting and sending word of the invasion matters most, then yes, let us increase our number of patrols. As we expect something to happen soon, we can risk devoting more men to the border even with our lack of

manpower.”

My brother nodded. “They’re going to be in a hurry to reach Ehrenfest’s foundation, so I doubt they’ll waste their time killing noncombatants. We should focus on minimizing casualties and buying ourselves time until the Knight’s Order arrives.”

I rushed to the training grounds and explained our circumstances to the knights.

“Thus, we need you to increase patrols along the border. I will join you. Did you receive reports of anything suspicious last night?”

“No,” our knight commander replied. “Neither last night nor this morning.”

I placed a hand on my chest, relieved. “Lady Rozemyne informed us that something serious is going to happen within the next few days. Please have the night patrols exercise extreme caution. If our foes mean to invade in secret, they will do so under cover of darkness.”

“In an ideal world, they would pass through while the commoners are asleep. Then we would just need to inform the archducal family...”

Our province’s knights were tasked with slaying feybeasts; matches during their student days aside, they had no experience fighting against other people. Worse still, we had only fifteen adult knights at our disposal. Even including the apprentices and me, we were fewer than twenty overall. I understood why they were so reluctant about fighting a greater duchy.

“Were that their plan, they would surely travel through Griebel instead,” I replied. “There is no guarantee that they will target Illgner, but keep your guard up nonetheless.”

“Very well. If a battle does break out, I would rather the knights from the Noble’s Quarter do most of the fighting. I would also pray that nobody uses heavy-duty magic tools and that our enemy won’t cause tremendous collateral damage.”

Indeed, a battle like that was the last thing we needed. The destruction of our mountains and forests would have a devastating impact on our paper-making industry.

“Putting aside the chances of an attack, Lady Brigitte, your presence in our humble Order makes it so much easier for us to communicate with the giebe. Your assistance and combat prowess as a mednoble are greatly appreciated.”

We weren't expecting an invasion from Frenbeltaag—our duchies were on good terms, and nothing in Lady Rozemyne's warning had given us reason to suspect them—so we focused our patrols on our border with Ahrensbach. None of the knights reported anything that night.

Then, during our patrol at noon the next day...

"Has that mountain ridge always looked like that?" I asked from atop my highbeast. One portion of the forest below appeared to be sunken—like an unnatural dent in the otherwise level timberline.

"Let us descend and take a closer look."

Suspicious, I approached the strange feature together with the five knights on patrol with me. Our inspection revealed that the trees on the other side of the mountain from the Giebe's estate had all vanished. The ground was scorched and covered with brown splotches as though a *trombe* had just attacked.

"What in the world...?!" I exclaimed, wide-eyed, as more trees on the Ahrensbach side of the mountains vanished right before our eyes.

"Look over there!" one of our knights shouted. "I see people!"

"They're wearing Ahrensbach capes!"

Waiting at the center of the blotched earth were several figures, each holding a black weapon. I couldn't help but gasp when I saw them.

"Those are the weapons used to steal mana from black feybeasts," I said. "They might be using them to drain the land instead."

The archducal family's warning had prepared me for an invasion, but I still couldn't believe my eyes. I'd expected Ahrensbach to march straight to our foundation, not steal mana from our land.

"Were they only marching through, we might have been able to watch from afar, but we can't leave them be when they're stealing our mana and destroying our land."

A shudder ran down my spine. The destruction of our forest would have a serious impact on our paper-making industry and on the commoners, who also relied on the mountain's boons. Our river would change once the rain began to fall, and our province's way of life would potentially succumb to natural disasters.

"There are four of them, from what I can see," one knight said. "Should we attack on our own?"

"No," I replied at length. "Let us return to the others, report our findings to the aub, and summon reinforcements. We risk being overwhelmed if there are more of them hiding among the trees."

No sooner had the words left my mouth than an arrow whizzed right past me. The invaders were shooting at us while retreating into the shadows.

"They've seen us!" one of our knights shouted. "Brace yourselves!"

"Get them before they can hide!"

"Be careful—their black weapons absorb mana!"

Surely there wasn't anything wrong with using offensive magic tools in this ruined section of the forest. We started dropping them on the trespassers, two of whom dispelled their black weapons to form shields.

"Keep them on the defensive! Those who dispel their black weapons will need to wait an entire day before they can make them again!"

The intruders wouldn't be able to steal mana from our land without black weapons. We moved in for the attack—but then I gasped.

"There are other squadrons nearby!" I cried. "I noticed them with my mana-sensing. They're coming this way!"

We were at an overwhelming disadvantage—their knights were almost certainly stronger than ours, *and* they had reinforcements coming. Trying to fight would mean our defeat, and if we stuck around for too much longer, we wouldn't even be able to flee.

"Don't follow them!" I called. "Retreat!"

Keeping our guards up, we raced straight back to the giebe's estate while sending out ordonnanzes of warning.

"Brother—as Lady Rozemyne said, we've been invaded. Not only are they attacking in great numbers and canvassing wide stretches of our land, but they're also stealing our mana, which we could never have predicted. Ask the aub for reinforcements; we can't hope to win by ourselves."

I'd just arrived at the giebe's office with the knight commander in tow. Viktor and my brother were standing over a map of our province.

"I requested aid the moment your ordonnanz arrived," my brother replied. "Lord Bonifatius is already en route with the Knight's Order, but with how quickly our land is being drained, will we even survive the wait? Brigitte—give me your honest opinion as a knight."

It wouldn't be enough to defeat our enemies; we would also need to minimize the damage they caused so that our people could continue to live their lives.

"The invaders we encountered were only a small group, but I sensed more of them all over," I said. "I don't know how well we'd fare against them, even if we mustered every knight at our disposal—and who knows how much damage they'll cause before our reinforcements arrive?"

If all they wanted was our mana, we could simply hole up in the estate and let them have it. The approach would spare us any casualties, but it would also mean complete devastation for the province.

"Those were nobles of Old Werkestock," the commander said.

"Excuse me?"

"I recognized them from the Royal Academy. The knights were protecting an Old Werkestock giebe."

We knew the fallen duchy was in desperate need of mana—its commoners were the ones sneaking into our province to scavenge the mountains—but the thought that its giebes were invading Ehrenfest to steal our mana astounded me.

"If they're here at Lady Georgine's insistence, I doubt they're going to back down..." I said. As members of a giebe family ourselves, we knew just how frantic they would be if their land was dying and their people were starving. But it wasn't like we could surrender.

"We're at an overwhelming numerical disadvantage against Ahrensbach and Old Werkestock. It won't be long before the two greater duchies crush us underfoot," the knight commander said with a heavy sigh. "Still, no matter how bad our situation might be or how reckless this might seem, we will need to fight tooth and nail until Lord Bonifatius arrives with reinforcements. I only hope we can spare the young ones."

"I refuse to stay on the sidelines," I protested. "How could we not use our entire force when our people are in danger?"

"Wait, Brigitte," Viktor interjected, the blood draining from his

face. “You aren’t a knight anymore—you’re a mother and a member of the giebe family. For our daughter’s sake, please don’t take part in this battle the knight commander has deemed so perilous. You’ve been out of training for a while now because of your commitments to Lilaroze; you would be in more danger than any of the other knights.”

I understood why he was so concerned, but that didn’t change anything. I wasn’t going to concede.

“I am a mother, a member of the giebe family, *and* a knight. The very suggestion that I should step aside instead of protecting my home is unthinkable. Imagine what my nonparticipation would do to morale.”

“But—”

“I am going to be in danger, but so is every other knight. It was for the sake of this province that I resigned from Lady Rozemyne’s service when we got married. I will *not* stand down when Illgner’s future is at risk.”

Lady Rozemyne still cared for me even now that I was no longer in her service. She had given our paper-making industry a tremendous amount of support and even contacted me directly to warn us of Ahrensbach’s invasion. Her assistance was an immense boon considering how little time I’d actually spent as her retainer. Not joining the action would make me an embarrassment of a knight.

“A threat to our home is a threat to our daughter,” I continued. “Lilaroze has you, my brother, and my mother to raise her in my stead. Our knights, on the other hand, have no one who can replace me. That’s why I’m entrusting her to you, Viktor. Now please, let me go.”

Viktor turned to my brother, his face a picture of anguish—but my brother shook his head in response.

“Forgive me, Viktor. As the giebe, I must use all the knights I can get. Not to mention, what would those putting their lives on the line think if they discovered that I was prioritizing my sister’s safety over the fate of our province?” He turned to me. “Brigitte, if you wish to protect Illgner, I will respect your decision. Just... don’t do anything unreasonable.”

Viktor hung his head and sighed. “Brigitte... You truly are too much of a knight for your own good. I understand your pride and your desire to protect your home, but... don’t forget that we have a

daughter, okay? And don't put yourself in more danger than you need to. Our focus right now is buying time, so stay alert and keep a close eye on the battlefield."

Upon seeing my husband relent, the knight commander shook his head and gave an exasperated smile. "Lady Brigitte, do not underestimate our concern for you. We want to make it through to the other side of this battle with as few casualties as possible. Viktor is right that buying time is our main focus, so we should aim to make our opponents dispel their black weapons. We'll attack their groups one by one with the full might of our military."

As we discussed ways to dispel the God of Darkness's blessing and what magic tools we would need to use, an ordonnanz flew into the room.

"This is Bonifatius. The aub has granted us permission to teleport. Expect us there at fifth bell. Clear the space by the teleporter in your estate's front garden and ensure your remaining knights are ready to sortie. We're setting out as soon as I arrive."

I couldn't believe my ears—not even when the message was delivered the third time. "He's coming here at fifth bell...? So... *today*? And with the Knight's Order? Using a *teleporter*?"

We had discovered the invaders after lunch, during our noon patrol, and then hurried to the estate to inform my brother. We hadn't even shared the news with our knights yet, so how were we already being sent reinforcements?

"It's almost fifth bell now! We need to find that teleporter! Where on earth is the estate's front garden?!"

"Calm down, Lord Helfried. It must surely be at the front of the estate."

"Lady Brigitte! We must inform our knights! We aren't yet ready to sortie!"

In an instant, the solemn resolve hanging over the room was completely blown away. We needed to prepare to welcome the Knight's Order and ensure that our recently returned patrol was ready to charge back into battle.

Just as the ordonnanz had said, at fifth bell on the dot, a magic circle appeared in the estate's front garden. The black and golden flames emblematic of a teleporter roared to life, and a large group appeared within them. The circle used when traveling to and from the Royal Academy could only move three people at a time, but I

counted at least fifty in front of us right now.

Once the flames had disappeared, Lord Bonifatius and several rows of knights marched off of the teleportation circle. The others who had just arrived—about a dozen in total—remained in place.

“Aub Ehrenfest?!” my brother yelled. We had expected reinforcements but not a visit from the archduke, of all people.

Upon seeing our astonishment, the aub waved a hand at us and said, “Be at ease; I’m only here because the teleporter wouldn’t have worked without me. I’ll be gone again before you know it.”

“Aub Ehrenfest,” my brother said, “I cannot thank you enough for providing these reinforcements so quickly. I did not even know there was a teleportation circle outside my estate.”

The aub gave a brisk nod. “I wasn’t aware of the circles either; it was Rozemyne who brought them to my attention. She learned about them from some old document, apparently. I imagine you’re aware that she reads the bible and other ancient texts to revive rituals and what have you. This is the first time in forever the circles have actually been used.”

“Lady Rozemyne...”

If not for her, this teleportation circle would never have been found, and Lord Bonifatius wouldn’t have arrived so suddenly to help us. Just how much did we owe that young woman?

“Giebe Illgner, this is as many reinforcements as Ehrenfest can provide right now,” the aub said. Then he gestured to the dozen still standing on the teleporter. “These scholars have been tasked with activating the magic circle; they are not to be lumped in with the knights. Now... protect your province.”

Leaving the archduke’s departure to my brother, I went to see Lord Bonifatius, who was partway through instructing the knights.

“Half of our lot used up mana to teleport us here. They won’t join us in the coming battle and will instead stay behind to serve as guards and replenish themselves. Now, who’s currently in charge of Illgner’s knights? I need to know more about our situation.”

“Lord Bonifatius,” I said, “allow me to report as a member of the giebe family. We discovered the intruders during our noon patrol.”

“Ah, Brigitte. It’s been a while.”

It would normally have fallen to our knight commander to deliver this information, but he had asked me to take over in case his nerves caused him to offend the archducal family. I’d trained

under Lord Bonifatius while serving as Lady Rozemyne's guard knight, so I wasn't all that tense about speaking with him.

"I see..." he said after listening to more of my report. "Black weapons certainly are troublesome; not only do they steal mana from the land, they also turn our mana attacks against us. We should use the same weapons we prepared to counter Ahrensbach's silver cloth—which reminds me, did you see anyone wearing any?"

I shook my head. "We suspect they saw no point in it, since they were using black weapons to steal our mana."

"The aub didn't sense any nobles pass through the duchy barrier. Chances are they have some..." Lord Bonifatius paused in thought, then nodded. "Getting our enemies to dispel their weapons is a good place to start. We've got it on good authority that the giebels might be storing the mana they're stealing in small chalices. If we can steal those chalices, we should be able to enrich your land again."

That was more intelligence from Lady Rozemyne, I suspected. I recalled the days I'd spent accompanying her to religious ceremonies. The small chalices were divine instruments used to fill the land with mana, but I could easily see someone malicious using them to *steal* mana instead.

Having acquired the information he'd wanted, Lord Bonifatius said, "Let's go" and marched off with half of the knights. The other half stayed behind and drank rejuvenation potions.

Illgner's in good hands.

The battle had just begun, and we were so far from the end... but seeing Lord Bonifatius filled me with confidence. Now that he was with us, I could somehow tell that everything was going to be okay.

First, we need to secure those chalices. That mana was bestowed upon us by my lady and the people of the temple.

"They were around here, Lord Bonifatius. Ah... More of the land has been drained."

Indeed, upon our arrival at the border, we'd come across even more brown earth than I'd seen before. The sight frustrated me immensely.

"Can anyone sense their mana?" Lord Bonifatius asked.

"We should descend a little."

We wouldn't be able to mana-sense our targets if they were too

far away. We headed closer to the forest, and it was then that we noticed some of the trees disappear at the edge of our vision.

“There!” I called.

“Everyone!” Lord Bonifatius shouted. “Follow behind me and steal the chalice!”



Having barked his instructions, Lord Bonifatius blasted past us all on his highbeast, pressing on alone. He cut in front of those attempting to flee with the province's mana and turned his schtappe into a halberd, despite having told us to use anti-silver weaponry.

"Lord Bonifatius?!" we all exclaimed in unison, so taken aback that some of our voices cracked. He paid us no mind, raising his weapon high before bringing it down in a great sweep.

"Did they say *Lord Bonifatius?!'*" one of the men on the ground cried. "Why is *he* here?!"

"Don't stop!" yelled another. "Steal the mana with our weapons!"

"Protect the giebe!"

"Scatter and retreat!"

From the trespassers' perspective, Lord Bonifatius was charging straight at them. They could only continue to panic as he swung his halberd with a loud grunt of exertion.

"Hrah!"

But he wasn't targeting our enemies. Instead, he sliced straight through the trees in the direction of their retreat, causing them to topple over like a landslide.

"Gaaah!"

"*Entwaff*—nghhh!"

Black weaponry meant nothing to wood. The thieves didn't even have time to dispel their arms and make shields before they were crushed under a mass of tree trunks and branches.

"Don't let them escape!" Lord Bonifatius shouted once we'd caught up with him.

The rest of our ambush was quick and easy. The enemy knights struck by the logs were heavily wounded, and those who had only been grazed had nowhere to run. We captured them all without breaking a sweat.

"The chalice! It's here!" one of our men exclaimed as he stripped the captured giebe of his equipment. "We can return the mana to our land!"

Our knights all cheered in chorus, but this wasn't the end of the battle. Last time, the invaders had all grouped together to scare us away, but now they'd scattered in fear of Lord Bonifatius.

"Frenbeltag's on alert, so the stragglers won't be able to escape

in that direction,” Lord Bonifatius said. “They don’t seem like threats, but they’re spread out far enough that we should anticipate a long battle—which is exactly their goal, I’d say. This is but a diversion to draw away the Knight’s Order... though there are fewer knights than I expected.”

Lord Bonifatius wore a deep frown. There was no risk of such a small invasion destroying Illgner, but it was substantial enough that our knights couldn’t deal with it on their own. And because mana was being stolen from our land, the archducal family had to respond.

The invaders who had appeared at our border showed up in Griebel the next day. Lord Bonifatius’s analysis had proved correct.

“Griebel has called for aid,” he said. “We will advance there while taking down any invaders we find along the border. Brigitte, stay here and guard Illgner’s perimeter!”

“Understood!”

Our new job was to take up posts by the border and forestall any further enemy invasions. Lord Bonifatius had opted to leave several knights behind, but to be honest, his departure for Griebel made us all uneasy.

“Rest assured—I’ll give you a good vantage point,” he said. “Just guard the border. Send word if their numbers are too much for you.” He and his group then launched a wave of mana attacks toward Ahrensbach as if venting their frustrations, devastating the tree line.

“I see. This certainly has improved our line of sight.”

“They can no longer come in secret, but some may boldly attack from the sky. Stay on your guard.”

Lord Bonifatius was on his way to Griebel—and once again, his conclusion had been proved correct. Invaders with barely any mana had come to our border at regular intervals, making it clear that they were just a decoy for the Knight’s Order.

“Lady Brigitte—a report,” an apprentice knight said to me between battles. “I was hoping to inform the giebe, but I was ordered to sortie with the other knights before I could speak with him. A lumber merchant who brought a delivery to Leisegang noticed some individuals who seemed a lot like nobles board a ship to Ehrenfest.”

As the apprentice gave me more details, a cold sweat ran down my back. Two days had passed since the merchant had seen these suspicious individuals. Even if they had taken the slowest, most roundabout vessel, it was possible they had arrived in Ehrenfest already.

“We must inform Lady Rozemyne at once!” I exclaimed. But when I tried to send her an ordonnanz, it refused to leave.

No... Lady Rozemyne?

I took in a sharp breath as thoughts of the worst-case scenario flooded through my mind. Ordonnanzes refused to fly when their recipient was dead. My hands trembled as I tried to contact Cornelius and Angelica—but both times, the bird did nothing.

“Does this mean Damuel is...?”

Despite my expectations, the ordonnanz actually traveled to him. His response was bland at best: “We are on guard against enemy attacks.”

Frustration welled up inside of me. Here I was worried sick that Lady Rozemyne and her guard knights had died in one of the many skirmishes comprising this war, while Damuel was being as nonchalant as ever. A voice at the back of my mind told me my anger was unreasonable, but if everyone was safe, why hadn’t the ordonnanzes flown to them? The constant stream of battles had made me too tense to simply swallow down my emotions, so the next ordonnanz I sent was overflowing with rage.

“Why are my ordonnanzes not flying?! I have a crucial report to give! What are Lady Rozemyne, Cornelius, and Angelica doing?! And where?!” I went on to repeat the news the apprentice had given me. “We are still in battle and cannot investigate when the ship from Leisegang will arrive. I ask that *you* investigate in our stead.”

“We will consult Leisegang,” Damuel replied, his composure completely intact. “Thank you for taking the time to send your report when you are so busy with the fighting. Oh, and your ordonnanzes aren’t reaching Lady Rozemyne’s group because they’re in Ahrensbach.”

My anger faded, replaced with overwhelming embarrassment. I was the only one who’d allowed my emotions to get the better of me, and rather than drawing attention to that fact, Damuel had politely relieved my concerns about Lady Rozemyne. As my head started to clear, I realized he’d also given me some information that

not even Lord Bonifatius had revealed.

Lady Rozemyne is in Ahrensbach?

In other words, while the archduke's troops were spread so thin that they couldn't spare us any more, Lady Rozemyne was fighting her own battle to protect Ehrenfest.

Does she never show restraint? It seems to me that she charges headlong into whatever she sets her mind to.

I was reminded of the battles we'd fought together while gathering for her jureve. A normal archduke candidate would have delegated the entire task to her guard knights, but she had joined us in spite of her poor health and ended up bedridden as a result. Even back then, Lady Rozemyne hadn't been a mere princess to be locked away safely in a tower.

Although her retinue has changed since then.

During my time in Lady Rozemyne's service, I'd battled alongside Damuel, Lord Ferdinand, and his retainers. Cornelius and Angelica had needed to stay in the castle for being too young, but they had come of age since then, and there were other new knights serving alongside them. I'd taken my leave after getting married, while Lord Ferdinand and his retainers had gone to Ahrensbach over an entirely separate betrothal.

Lady Rozemyne's current retinue made the passage of time even more apparent and forced me to reflect on how much my own position had changed. In the past, I'd fought for Lady Rozemyne. Now I fought for Illgner and my family. My focus had changed, but not my aim—I'd always wanted to protect those close to me.

The knowledge that Lady Rozemyne was fighting to protect Ehrenfest gave me the resolve to do the same as her former guard knight. Fighting and winning these border skirmishes would connect me to her in our mutual struggle to save our duchy.

"Lady Brigitte, more invaders!" a knight called.

I rose to my feet without the slightest hesitation, then mounted my highbeast alongside my fellow knights. Everyone wore looks of unbendable determination.

Lady Rozemyne... May Angriff guide you. I shall take inspiration from your actions and devote my all to protecting my home.

Philine — Just like Our Drills

"Let us be quick, Philine," Gretia said. "We are going to be

late.”

“Right,” I replied. “We need to hurry. Everyone, excuse us.”

Together with my fellow retainer, I rushed out of the dressing room and climbed upstairs to the retainer room. Our lady wasn’t present at the castle—she had gone to Ahrensbach to save Lord Ferdinand—but those of us who remained still gathered at second bell for a meeting. We would share intelligence before returning to our operations.

“Good morning, everyone,” I said. “Apologies for the wait.”

“Philine, Gretia—such a leisurely arrival is rare for the two of you. Has something happened?” Otilie asked, looking at us with concern.

“The dressing room was busy. In part because Lord Bonifatius’s group was deployed, everyone is fervently gathering intelligence...”

Archnobles and upper-class mednobles serving as archducal retainers generally lived in the castle, so they brought attendants from home to dress them. Gretia and I were too poor for that, however, so we had to dress ourselves. Our weak positions coupled with the fact we were still underage made us easy targets, so we had ended up being surrounded by those seeking information.

“I will send an ordonnanz the next time I feel you are being kept from your duties,” Otilie said.

Bertilde smiled and added that she would fetch us if ever the need arose. As an archnoble, she seemed quite curious to see the inside of the dressing room.

Once Gretia and I were seated, Otilie looked over us all. “Now then—allow me to begin my report. An ordonnanz from Rihyarda arrived.”

In our lady’s absence, important news from the archducal family reached us through Rihyarda or Lord Melchior’s retainers. It was Otilie’s duty to receive their ordonnanzes as someone permanently stationed in the castle, but she had easy access to such intelligence anyway. Her husband served as Lady Florencia’s scholar, after all.

“There has been a disturbance in Gerlach as well as in Illgner and Griebel,” she continued. “In all cases, the invaders seem especially wary of Lord Bonifatius. We are to remain on high alert in case anything happens here.”

The evening before last, the castle’s atmosphere had turned exceptionally sharp when Lord Bonifatius’s group had departed for

Illgner, intending to serve as reinforcements. Invaders had appeared in Griebel the next day—and we had received word that the war had grown even larger in scale, creating further issues. The chaos had then spread to Gerlach this morning. In truth, it was hard not to feel like the conflict was quietly approaching us.

“On another note, a letter has arrived from Clarissa. Lady Rozemyne is still unconscious, but Lord Ferdinand has set out for Ehrenfest with Dunkelfelger’s knights. The aub has been informed.”

Ottilie held out an envelope as if to punctuate her report. The border gate we shared with Ahrensbach must have fallen into enemy hands, as the only letter that had made it through was from Clarissa, a Dunkelfelgerian. We knew there had been other attempts at correspondence because she had mentioned that Hartmut was also sending letters.

“Bertilde, how is the archducal family?” Ottilie asked, turning to look at the girl in question.

Bertilde rummaged through her things before taking out a piece of paper. She was supporting Brunhilde in Lady Rozemyne’s absence—in part because Brunhilde was still short of retainers, but also so that she could more easily obtain information about the archducal family.

“Lady Charlotte has been overseeing communications with the Knight’s Order and directing the rear line, allowing the aub to stay with the foundation,” Bertilde said. “Two days ago, Lady Florencia was managing the distribution of provisions, rejuvenation potions, and other supplies to the knights, but my elder sister took over from her yesterday. All roles can be swapped as necessary... And that is my report!”

Bertilde had concluded as dramatically as if she’d just finished reading a script; I suspected that Brunhilde had written the report for her. The castle’s main building seemed particularly busy right now as everyone made their final preparations for the archducal family to join the battle.

“Still, even now, I struggle to believe Lady Rozemyne has taken Ahrensbach’s foundation. Is such a feat even possible...?” I mused aloud. Maybe because I was a laynoble who knew very little of the foundational magics, I’d always seen the aub as a strictly hereditary role. The idea of someone *stealing* a foundation was absurd.

“It is,” Damuel replied with a stern expression, “and Lady Georgine knows the same technique Lady Rozemyne used. She

could steal our foundation just as easily.”

Ever since Lord Bonifatius’s departure, Damuel had been staying not in the temple but with the Knight’s Order, meaning he was able to keep us abreast of the war. The tension the Order must have been feeling flowed freely through his every word.

“Philine, Roderick, is the temple still running evacuation drills?” Damuel asked.

I exchanged a look with Roderick before giving a firm nod. “Yes. We have reached a point where we now work seamlessly with Lord Melchior’s retainers.”

At first, we had each focused only on the role given to us, but the process had smoothed out as we’d repeated and gotten more used to our drills. Neither gray nor blue priests could use *ordonnances*, so without practice, keeping in touch with them wouldn’t be a simple matter.

“Lieseleta, Gretia, is the Gutenbergs’ accommodation ready?” Damuel asked, continuing his inspection.

“We have bedding for them and two days’ worth of provisions. It is all very basic, considering that this is an emergency situation, and we have only secured two rooms for them—for the men and women, respectively. Still, we are looking into whether we can use the beds and such in Lasfam’s and the servants’ rooms.”

As archducal attendants, Lieseleta and Gretia were somewhat disheartened that they hadn’t been able to make adequate preparations for our guests, commoners or otherwise. I nodded along with their report and then remembered that I also had something to add.

“Um, we received a request from the Plantin Company. In the event of an incident, they have asked for Lady Rozemyne’s incomplete outfits and the Gilberta Company’s seamstresses to be evacuated to the library with the Gutenbergs. They do not want the seamstresses who have so industriously banded together to make new clothes for Lady Rozemyne to be put in harm’s way.”

Lieseleta and Ottilie turned to look at one another, then nodded. To attendants, the completion of their lady’s clothing was a most important duty—especially when she was going to need so many outfits for her upcoming royal adoption.

“Indeed, we would not want to delay the completion of Lady Rozemyne’s new clothes,” Ottilie said. “Lieseleta, Gretia—stay in contact with Lasfam and arrange for the seamstresses to be

accommodated. I suspect he would struggle to prepare a sewing room for them on his own.”

Lieseleta and Gretia nodded.

“On a more general note,” Otilie continued, “Bertilde, continue to support Brunhilde and learn what you can. Lieseleta, Gretia, prepare the library. Judithe, accompany Philine and Roderick to the temple. Damuel, stay with the Knight’s Order. Every single one of you must be ready to take on whatever is asked of you when the need arises. That is all. Disperse.”

Our meeting in the retainer room concluded, I mingled with Lord Melchior’s retainers as we all made our way to the temple. His and Lady Rozemyne’s temple attendants greeted us upon our arrival.

“Good morning, everyone.”

Gil was there too, even though he was usually in the workshop at this time. He must have been waiting for our response to the Plantin Company.

“The Plantin Company’s request has been granted,” I said. “Please evacuate Lady Rozemyne’s outfits and the seamstresses with everyone else.”

“Understood,” Gil replied. “I will inform them at once.” He must have been impatiently awaiting an answer because he immediately took his leave and briskly made his way to the workshop.

“Lady Judithe, Lord Roderick—come with me, if you would,” Fran said. “Lady Philine, Monika will be with you today.”

Judithe and Roderick went with Fran to the High Bishop’s chambers. Meanwhile, I went with Monika to the orphanage director’s chambers to change into my apprentice blue shrine maiden robes. The rooms were in my care, but they were no place to live—not when the attendants and chefs were all still assigned to the High Bishop’s chambers. My current position was that of a commuting apprentice blue shrine maiden.

“The battle in Ahrensbach was successful, wasn’t it?” Monika asked as she helped me put on my robes, her concern clear on her face. “When will Lady Rozemyne return? Have any new letters arrived...?”

I gave a somewhat troubled smile; she had asked me the same questions yesterday. “As far as we know, Lady Rozemyne has yet to

regain consciousness. But she is expected to wake up at some point today.”

It wasn’t unusual for Lady Rozemyne to be away from the temple—she always had one reason or another to be elsewhere—but she had gone to another duchy to participate in a war; it was only natural that Monika was so worried. To my knowledge, Fran and Gil were asking the same questions.

“We are awaiting Lady Rozemyne’s safe return just as eagerly as you all are here in the temple,” I said.

Once I was changed, I went to fetch Judithe; then we headed to the High Bishop’s chambers to help Lord Melchior with his work. Roderick wouldn’t be joining us today—there was no reason for him to get involved with temple work when he planned to accompany Lady Rozemyne to the Sovereignty. Instead, he was transcribing books for her so that she wouldn’t be without any when she moved.

“Today, we must check the income reports of both the Rozemyne Workshop and the orphanage.”

The monthly income check had a direct impact on the orphanage’s daily operations, so it was said to be the orphanage director’s most important duty. It was performed in the presence of both the High Bishop and the High Priest to prevent embezzling.

Monika placed several documents in front of Lord Melchior, the future High Bishop; his retainer Lord Kazmiar, the future High Priest; and me. They were a mixture of wooden boards and paper, and their contents ranged from forms given to us by the Plantin Company to internal reports from the workshop to Wilma’s bookkeeping for the orphanage.

“I see there was a dramatic rise in food costs,” I said. “Was there a reason for that?”

“That was when winter ended and the market reopened, allowing us to purchase more supplies.”

“And the income for winter handiwork? I don’t see it listed anywhere.”

“That will feature in our next check. We have the money, but the Plantin Company has yet to deliver its final report.”

We checked the income reports alongside those from last month, compared them to the ones from last year, and did our best to find any mistakes or discrepancies.

Gong... Gong...

We were only midway through the monthly check when third bell rang. A man of Lord Ferdinand's talents would have been able to weed out each and every issue merely by skimming the documents, but we were far from being on his level. Still, as much as our inexperience was slowing us down, it was fun looking through the reports and such while chatting with everyone.

"These are the apprentices due to come of age in spring. And this is a list of orphans being baptized in summer," I said. "We are preparing rooms and clothing for them, as is covered in this entry here."

"These figures are so much smaller than the costs of preparing my chambers..." Lord Melchior replied. "I have to wonder if I've been living wastefully."

"I would not compare them, Lord Melchior. Your chambers are by no means equivalent to the rooms given to orphans."

As we continued our conversation, an ordonnanz flew into the room. Rather than going to Lord Melchior or Lord Kazmiar, it came straight to me and perched on my arm.

"Philine, this is Damuel," the little bird said. We all knew about his connection to the Knight's Order, so our ears pricked up upon hearing his voice. "We received this tip from a commoner, but several suspicious figures who might have been Lady Georgine's group were seen boarding an Ehrenfest-bound merchant vessel in Leisegang. We consulted the dock and were told the ship should reach the west gate at around noon. Evacuate before then, but do not panic; there is still enough time for you to follow procedures."

Damuel wanted us to stay calm, but my heart was already in my throat. Lady Georgine was on her way. My hands shook so violently that when I tried to respond, I couldn't even tap the feystone with my schtappe.

"Allow me to inform Lord Melchior's guard knights and summon the blue priests," Lord Kazmiar said, the picture of composure. "Do you remember what you need to do once you have sent your response?"

I didn't even need to think about my answer; the words came out almost automatically. "I will announce the evacuation to the orphanage and the gate guards."

"Good," Lord Kazmiar replied. His praise calmed me down enough that I managed to steady my hand and create an ordonnanz.

"Damuel, this is Philine. I thank you ever so much for the

warning. We will start the evacuation at once. May Angriff guide you.”

I swung my schtappe, and the ordonnanz took flight. Only when it was completely out of sight did I start putting away my writing utensils. Monika had already gathered together the documents, and Judithe sent an ordonnanz to Roderick in the High Bishop’s chambers.

“We received word from Lord Damuel—finish the evacuation before noon. We will go to the orphanage. Roderick, remember the drills.”

Roderick was tasked with using magic letters to contact the Plantin Company. He would then prepare the High Bishop’s chambers.

“Philine—it’s time.”

We stepped out into the corridor, leaving Lord Kazmiar’s group to send out a flurry of ordonnanzes, and started toward the orphanage; as there were no nobles there or in the workshop, we would need to deliver the news to them in person. Nothing slowed our march, but we called out to the gray priests and shrine maidens we encountered en route, telling them to finish up and head straight to the orphanage. We even caught sight of my little brother, Konrad, cleaning the hall right outside the noble section.

“Konrad, you should evacuate as well,” I said.

“Are Dirk and the others okay?” he asked, casting a worried glance in the direction of the noble section as he put his cleaning rag back in its bucket. Those baptized as apprentice blue priests had already moved elsewhere.

“I will check if they have evacuated later. Now run along. If you don’t get to safety, they might be the ones worrying about you.”

“Right,” he replied with a nod.

Fran then spoke up from behind us: “Lady Philine, I will go to the workshop. I must confirm that Lutz and the others have gone home.”

“Please do,” I said; there were Plantin Company employees there, and the Gutenbergs among them needed to move to Lady Rozemyne’s library at once. “As per our drills, gather in the dining hall once the boys’ building has been evacuated.”

Fran nodded, then took the next right to the boys’ building. I went left and continued to the girls’ building. Monika opened the door for me when we arrived, whereupon I addressed Wilma and

the others.

“We have received an update from the Knight’s Order: the evacuations must begin immediately. Please stay calm and act according to plan.”

Wilma’s entire body went rigid, but she nodded and went to the third floor to check for any gray shrine maidens. Delia said she would check the rooms on the first floor and then headed downstairs. At the same time, Lily instructed the children in the dining hall to go to the basement. They were doing exactly as we’d practiced.

“All we need to do is follow our plans,” I told myself. “Just do as Lady Rozemyne instructed.”

I entrusted speaking with the returning shrine maidens to Monika and went downstairs with Judithe to tell the cooks to evacuate. It was then that an ordonnanz appeared and landed on my fellow retainer’s arm.

“This is Fonsel. I’ve arrived at the Noble’s Gate. Dedryck is heading to the front gate now.” Those among Lord Melchior’s guard who had been with the Knight’s Order were arriving at the temple one by one.

“I’ll make my way to the back gate,” Judithe said to me. “I need to activate the shumils so they can take over from the gray priests on duty. Remember to go back to the High Bishop’s chambers with Fran and Monika once you’re done here.”

“Yes, I remember. Take care of the gate, and... Just be careful, Judithe.”

Just as she stopped escorting me and went through the basement to get outside, the gray shrine maidens returned from the workshop. “This is all of us,” one of them informed me.

“Then we can close the doors.”

In the past, the doors had been designed in such a way that they could only be opened from the outside. Now the reverse was true. It seemed unlikely that Lady Georgine would enter the orphanage, but for safety’s sake, we started barricading ourselves in with pots and furniture. I confirmed that everything was proceeding smoothly before returning to the dining hall.

“There was nobody upstairs.”

“Everyone has gathered in the basement.”

No sooner had Wilma and Lily reported to me than Fran confirmed the successful evacuation of the boys’ building. A deep

sigh escaped me; to my relief, I'd carried out my duty as the orphanage director.

"Now stay inside and remain quiet until we return to announce that everything is safe," I said, then took my leave with Fran and Monika. We heard the door lock behind us, and Wilma's footsteps faded into the distance.

"Let us return as well."

We closed the door to the noble section, hoping to put as many obstacles in our enemies' path as we could. Then I went to see Dirk and Bertram in their rooms, intending to assuage my little brother's worries.

"Stay still and remain quiet," I said firmly. "Even if you hear a fuss or a scream outside, do *not* open the door to investigate. Is that understood?"

From there, I continued to the third floor where the women's rooms were located. This was my domain to check, since it wasn't somewhere the boys were comfortable exploring.

"No matter how scared you might be, do not leave your room under any circumstances," I said, relaying the same warning to the apprentice blue shrine maidens. "Nowhere is going to be safer."

By the time I returned to the High Bishop's chambers, Roderick was there to welcome me with a "Good work." Gil, Fritz, Nicola, Hugo, and their assistants from the kitchen were also present. Commoner servants would never normally be allowed inside the High Bishop's chambers, but they were Lady Rozemyne's personnel; she had instructed Roderick and me to fuel a barrier magic tool with our mana to protect them.

The tables and chairs had already been moved to make way for the magic tool, which now sat at the very center of the room. Lady Rozemyne had made it to protect us and the other noncombatants staying in the temple. In her words, it would make these chambers as safe as the library.

Once I'd confirmed that everyone was present, I sent an ordonnanz to Lord Kazmiar.

"This is Philine. We have evacuated the orphanage and closed the door to the noble section. I've also spoken with the apprentice blue shrine maidens on the third floor. The attendants of the High Bishop's chambers have all returned."

"Everyone, are you ready for us to activate the barrier?" Roderick asked. "Once we start pouring mana into it, nobody's

going to be able to leave or enter the room.”

I took a moment to consider everyone’s responses, then turned to Roderick and nodded. His expression tense, he drank a mana-only rejuvenation potion before touching the tool and channeling his mana into it.

Lady Rozemyne’s magic tool was a splendid creation capable of blocking all manner of attacks, but activating it required an immense amount of mana. The device was quick to consume as much as it was given, so if we didn’t remove our hands in time, Roderick and I would almost certainly end up entirely depleted.

I waited for my turn with an identical rejuvenation potion in hand. And soon enough...

“Philine! Get ready!” Roderick called.

I drank the potion and touched the magic tool. Roderick waited until my hand was firmly in place before removing his own so that the flow of mana wouldn’t be broken.

Eek! My mana!

Not even the restorative properties of the rejuvenation potion stopped me from feeling my mana being drained. It wasn’t a sensation I was used to—in fact, it was really disturbing—but it was the only way we could protect the people our lady had put in our care.

Compared to the knights fighting on the front lines, this is nothing!

Roderick’s mana must have been regenerating at an astonishing rate; his breathing was ragged, and his brow was furrowed in displeasure.

“Oh, the feystone’s color changed,” he soon observed. “Just a bit more.”

After taking a deep breath, Roderick put his hand back on the tool. The feystone flashed only a few moments later, and yellow light filled the room as a powerful barrier of wind took shape. The sensation of mana churning within my body disappeared at the same time, replaced instead with complete and utter exhaustion. The same must have been true for Roderick; he had to put his hands on the floor to stop himself from collapsing.

“Lady Philine! Lord Roderick!”

Monika and Nicola held me up while Fran and Gil brought Roderick back to his feet. We were taken to a bench, and we both let out deep sighs the moment we plopped down.

“With this, the High Bishop’s chambers are safe...” I wheezed,

thankful the tool had activated before we'd run out of mana. "We did it, Roderick."

He gazed at the tool, equally relieved. "And that's our job done. Hartmut should be satisfied."

Hartmut had said to us during our drills, "Neither one of you will be of any use in battle. But since you're nobles, you can at least activate defensive magic tools and protect the commoners Lady Rozemyne needs."

"Excellent work, both of you," Fran said.

Seeing the barrier we'd activated with our mana gave me an overwhelming sense of accomplishment. Zahm handed us cups of fruit juice while the attendants and chefs all praised us.

And then an ordonnanz arrived.

"This is Judithe. Damuel sent word that the boat has arrived at the west gate. Be ready—people in silver cloth have been spotted."

Everyone in the room tensed up. The worst was finally upon us, and there was only one thing we could do now.

"May victory come to Ehrenfest. May everyone be safe. O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies, O mighty Eternal Five who rule the mortal realm, O Goddess of Water Flutrane, O God of Fire Leidenschaft, O Goddess of Wind Schutzaria, O Goddess of Earth Geduldh, O God of Life Ewigeliebe—we offer you our prayers and gratitude. Praise be to the gods!"

Fourth bell rang out as we prayed.

Effa — Strong Bonds, Strong Protection

"Mom, come on! We gotta go! Master Benno said we need to evacuate! A soldier's gonna come soon and say the same thing. A fight's about to break out at the west gate, so we gotta evacuate before noon!"

It was third bell, and my son had just burst into my workroom. Rumors had already spread of the city's knights being sent to fight a war in the south, and with the recent decision to station knights at *all* of the city's gates, not just the north one, his announcement caused an understandable stir in the workshop. Threats from other duchies were coming to Ehrenfest, and as mere commoners, the most we could do was find somewhere safe to hide, whether at home or at work. There was nothing we could hope to accomplish in a battle between nobles.

“Let’s go, Mom,” Kamil urged.

Together we rushed out of the workshop. The Gutenbergs and other personnel going with Lady Rozemyne to the Sovereignty had been told to evacuate to the Noble’s Quarter, but first we needed to go to the Plantin Company. We were all supposed to meet there and then travel by carriage.

“Oh, we’re not meeting at the Plantin Company anymore,” my son informed me. “We’ve gotta head to the Gilberta Company instead.”

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“Too much stuff!”

Kamil was only a child, so he wasn’t the best at explaining things, but I could guess Mr. Benno had sent him to make sure I went to the right place. No soldiers had come to announce the evacuation, so the city crowd didn’t seem particularly tense; we were the only ones hurrying down the street.

“Go inside, Mom,” Kamil urged me. “Go see Tuuli.”

Sitting outside the Gilberta Company were three carriages, if they could even be called that; they were more like fancy horse-drawn wagons designed to transport large groups of people at once.

I rushed past those busily moving luggage into the wagons and went into the store, whereupon Tuuli gestured me over. I went with her into the back room, confused, and saw several women changing clothes behind a screen.

“For obvious reasons, we can’t go to the Noble’s Quarter dressed as we are now,” she said. “Could you change into these?”

“Hurry, hurry! We don’t have long before noon!” another seamstress urged as she helped the others change.

I did as instructed and wriggled into the new clothes I was given. They were even more elegant than my best dress—the one I’d worn for my coming-of-age ceremony. Under any other circumstances, I wouldn’t have felt comfortable putting them on, but I didn’t have time to waste when everyone was in such a rush.

“Once you’re done, Mom, board the carriage. Oh, and take this with you. Hmm... Gunilla! Is that everything?”

Tuuli spoke with one of the other seamstresses while I went back outside with a wooden box in my arms. The soldiers were now out and about, ordering everyone to evacuate. Seeing the rush of people hurrying down the street made me feel increasingly uneasy.

“You’re in the front wagon, Zack,” Lutz said. He was directing those of us who had finished getting changed. “You can sit in the second one with your wife if you really want, but it’s meant to be for women only.”

Beside him, Mr. Benno was shouting in the direction of the store. “Time to go! Anyone who’s not in their wagon is getting left behind!”

That was the last thing I wanted. I went over to Lutz and asked which wagon I was meant to ride in.

“The back one, please. It won’t be comfortable, since it’s full of the Gilberta Company’s luggage, but you won’t be in there for long. We’re about to leave.”

I took my luggage into the wagon and sat down. Lutz must have put me with the Gilberta Company’s seamstresses, as Mrs. Corinna, Tuuli, and the rest of their group soon joined me.

“Mr. Benno sent word just this morning that we need to protect Lady Rozemyne’s new outfits and that the Gilberta Company’s seamstresses need to evacuate too,” Tuuli explained. “That’s why there’s so much luggage. We’re bringing our tools so we can work while we’re hiding.”

As we discussed this and that, the wagon started to move. It took us all the way to the gate outside the Noble’s Quarter and then stopped.

“Ah! It’s Damuel,” Tuuli said, having been gazing out the window.

“Wonderful,” Mrs. Corinna added with a smile. “My brother said we would see him here. If not for Lord Damuel, we might have been waiting the entire day.”

Commoners trying to enter the Noble’s Quarter were normally stopped at the gate and stalled for a painfully long time. But because Lord Damuel had come out to meet us, we were let right through.

“This is the Noble’s Quarter. It’s your first time coming here, right, Mom?”

I peered outside, and my eyes widened. *This* was where Myne lived...? Beautiful pure-white stone stretched out in every direction, and there was so much greenery. There was a lot of space too, especially compared to back home; it was so empty that I started to question if anyone else was even here.

"I don't see any other people or carriages..." I said.

"Carriages are a pretty common sight here," Tuuli explained. "I think the nobles have already evacuated, though."

"Ah. That makes sense."

I continued to look around. Each ivory building was a noble estate, I was told, and they weren't even shared; each one housed a single family.

"Then again, they technically *are* shared to some degree, since servants and attendants live there too," Mrs. Corinna explained with a smile. "It really is shocking to see so many enormous estates, right? Each one is supposed to have its own garden too."

I was extra shocked to discover that nobles didn't even share wells. It made me wonder when they had the opportunity to spend time with their neighbors and share gossip.

"Mom, the archduke's castle is behind that wall," Tuuli said, pointing. "I went there for the first time just recently. It was so huge that I couldn't believe it."

Myne lived even farther back, apparently.

"I heard we're going to Lady Rozemyne's library today. Is that here in the castle?" I asked.

"No, I think it's in the estate the previous High Priest gave her before he went somewhere else. Lutz doesn't know the details either; he just told me what he learned from Gil."

"Oh... Well, I'm looking forward to seeing it."

"Mm-hmm," one of the seamstresses added. "All noble estates look the same on the outside, but their interiors are totally unique. I can't wait to see what Lady Rozemyne's is like."

The seamstresses were beside themselves with excitement to see the designs and decorations inside the estate. I suspected they wanted to use them as inspiration for future outfits.

The decorations aren't what I'm excited to see, though.

The Gutenbergs were being evacuated to Lady Rozemyne's estate, and the arrival of so many commoners meant the lady of the house would need to be present. I assumed we would only exchange greetings, but if nothing else, I would get to see my daughter again. It was the one silver lining to all this chaos.

As our conversation moved from clothes to dyes, the wagon turned a corner. I already knew that each plot of land belonged to a noble estate, but there were three buildings on each one. Which house was whose? And would Myne's neighbors complain about so

many commoners passing by their homes? As those questions ran through my mind, we continued past two more structures and then stopped outside the largest one at the very back.

I stepped out of the wagon and gazed up at the estate towering over us. “*This* is Lady Rozemyne’s house?” I was too dazed to believe it. The building was far too giant for an unmarried child. Not even the homes of the rich in front of the temple were this big.

Lord Damuel shook his head. “Not a house—a *library*.” He was the noble who had always seen Myne home safely during her days as an apprentice blue shrine maiden. Even now, he stayed by her side as a guard knight and regularly bridged the gap between the worlds of nobles and commoners. Gunther had told me he was an honest man—someone you could really trust.

“Um, what’s a library?” I asked. “Is it not somewhere you live?”

“It’s a place used to store books you’ve collected—like a way of organizing them so they’re easy to access. You could sleep in one, but since Lady Rozemyne spends her time in the castle or the temple, she doesn’t actually live in hers.”

It’s a house for books...?

That didn’t make sense to me at all. Myne had always been obsessed with books and paper and whatnot, but I’d never expected her to use the giant house the High Priest had given her for *this*. She must have been causing so much trouble for those around her.

“Mom, hurry!” Kamil called from halfway up a long set of stairs. Lord Damuel urged me on as well, so I started making my way up.

“You are Lady Rozemyne’s personnel and the Gutenbergs, I assume? Do come in,” a young man said as he opened the estate’s door for us. His mannerisms and way of speaking made it obvious he was a noble, which rooted us all to the spot; we hadn’t expected a noble attendant to welcome us.

“I understand your surprise, but could you go inside?” Lord Damuel said wryly. He had just come up the steps behind us.

“Is, uh... Lady Rozemyne not here?” Mr. Benno asked. “I should like to greet her before intruding upon her estate.” I didn’t know what the expectations were when meeting with nobles, but judging by how hesitant he seemed, meeting the lord or lady of a household must have been a very big deal.

“She is absent,” Lord Damuel replied. “Members of the archducal family must fight to protect their duchy in times of war.

She's already leading a detachment of knights on the front lines."

The Gutenbergs all gasped. I did as well. It hadn't even crossed my mind that we might be invited to an estate while its lady was away. And never in all my life had I expected *Myne*, who was still only a young woman, to lead troops into battle.

"Is it okay for her to be doing that? She's much too sickly—um, I mean, she is quite unwell," Lutz said, likely having spoken without thinking.

Lord Damuel raised an eyebrow. "I won't pretend there isn't risk involved, but this is Lady Rozemyne. She obtained her forces using methods nobody else would ever have employed—or even considered, for that matter—and now she's just forging ahead as she pleases. I'm confident she'll win no matter what predicaments she ends up in."

"That certainly is true..." Lutz said with a smile and a nod. Mr. Benno and Mr. Mark smiled as well, which helped calm me down a little; they knew far more about *Myne's* noble persona than I did.

"In short, forget about the greeting for now," Lord Damuel said. "Just wait until the battle is over. We need you here, since you're going with Lady Rozemyne to the Sovereignty. This estate has so many protective magic tools that your safety is guaranteed. Lady Rozemyne instructed me to guard you all, but I must head to the west gate before the enemy arrives."

Did he just say the west gate?!

First to enter the estate was Mr. Benno, who had more experience with nobles than the rest of us—though it did take some urging from Lord Damuel. Next was Mark. I watched them out of the corner of my eye, but I was so preoccupied with my husband's absence that I couldn't move.

This house might be safe, but what about Gunther? He's at the west gate.

I was forcefully reminded of when a noble from another duchy had targeted *Myne* in the temple. Gunther had sustained an injury on his arm, and the sight of him hunched over, racked with regret that he hadn't been able to protect our daughter, was burned into my memory. There wasn't a doubt in my mind that, like before, he would devote his all to defending the city and his family.

As my uncertainty returned, I ended up squeezing the charm *Myne* had given me. I'd been told it would activate when struck by something that would normally do a lot of damage.

Would it help Gunther to have even one more of these...?

Maybe, but I wasn't in a position to give him mine. Would it be rude to ask Lord Damuel to deliver it for me, since he already had plans to head to the gate? I debated the question while watching him speak with an attendant by the door who looked like she had just come of age.

"Lieseleta, we aren't going to be sheltering any more commoners here," he said. "Activate the barrier once I'm gone."

"As you will. Gretia and I shall see it done. Be safe, Damuel."

Lord Damuel nodded in response, then turned to leave.

"Mom, what are you doing?" Tuuli asked. "Everyone else has gone inside." She and Kamil tried to pull me into the estate by my hands, but my body wouldn't move; this was my last chance.

Lord Damuel turned around when he heard Tuuli cry out. He noticed that I was standing in the doorway and said, "Is something wrong?" I saw consideration in his gray eyes, and the way he looked at me encouraged me to speak.

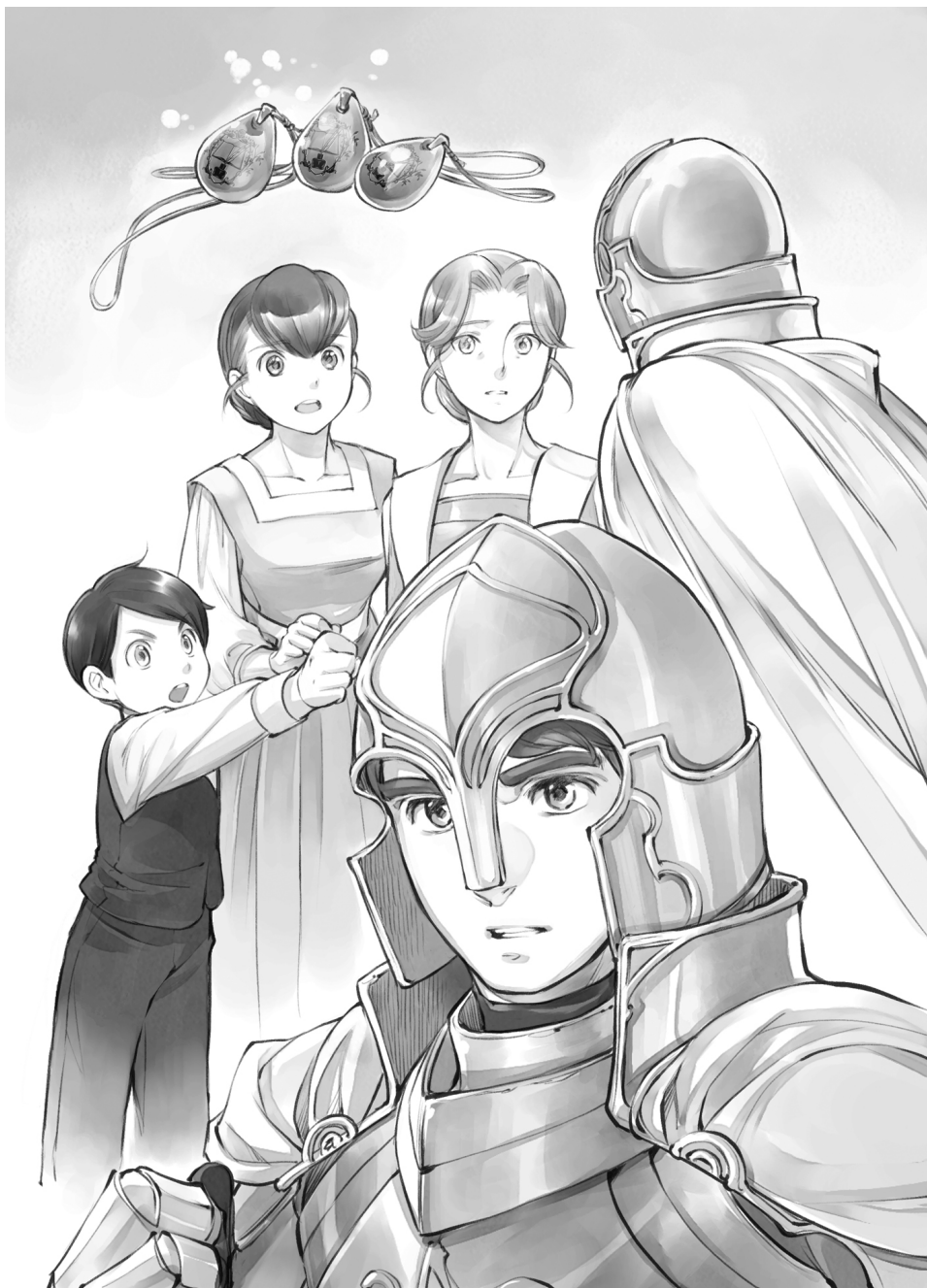
This is Lord Damuel. He won't be offended.

I removed and then held out my charm. "Lord Damuel, I'm sorry for speaking out of place, but please give this to my husband at the west gate while you're there. If we're going to be safe here, he'll need it more than I do. Please give him Lady Rozemyne's charm so that no harm comes to him."

"Alright," Lord Damuel said at length. "I'll take it."

As I thanked him, Tuuli held out her own charm. "Lord Damuel, please take mine too. Dad needs it more right now."

Kamil did the same. "You can tell Lady Rozemyne we handed ours over because we wanted to protect Dad."



“It would be my honor,” Lord Damuel said, accepting our charms with a gentle smile. “Now, if that’s all, I must be heading to the west gate. Hurry on inside.”

And with that, he climbed onto his highbeast and flew away.

Come home safe, Gunther... I pray that you don't end up in danger.

Once we were inside, the young man from before closed and locked the door behind us. The others were waiting for us in the entrance hall.

“Lasfam, if you would guide them the rest of the way. We will activate the magic tools,” Lady Lieseleta said to the young man—Lord Lasfam—before heading farther into the house with Lady Gretia. They were going to use the magic tools Lord Damuel had mentioned to keep us all safe.

After watching the two girls leave, Lord Lasfam led the rest of us through the estate. “Please take care not to venture upstairs. For that is where the master chambers reside.”

The young man continued to explain the places we wouldn’t be allowed access to while showing us the rooms we would use if the battle stretched on. The furnishings alone told me this was a *very* expensive house, and it made me all the more thankful that I’d changed my clothes; I wouldn’t have dared sit down in my usual getup.

“Those of the Gilberta Company—please bring Lady Rozemyne’s outfits here,” Lord Lasfam said. “We have prepared a room in which you can sew.”

“Thank you,” Mrs. Corinna replied. She then looked at the mountain of luggage being brought through the estate and paused.

“Er, allow us,” Zack said. “There’s not much else for us to do here, so just say the word if you need us.”

A warm smile spread across Mrs. Corinna’s face. “Oh my. Zack, Johann... Thank you.”

Meanwhile, Tuuli was speaking with a woman from another wagon—someone she knew, from the look of things. “It’s been a while, Ella. I see you’re staying here too. I thought the chefs would have evacuated to the temple.”

“I was on leave to have my son,” the young woman replied, nodding to the baby in her arms. “I came here with him and my mom. I doubt I’ll see you again before we leave, so until then.”

Ella then gave her baby to her mother before approaching our guide. “Lord Lasfam, will the estate struggle to prepare lunch for so many unexpected guests? My mother can watch over my son, so allow me to help as Lady Rozemyne’s personal chef.”

“I would appreciate that greatly.”

“Should we help too?” one woman asked as she and the other Gutenbergs’ wives stepped forward. “We might not know noble recipes, but we can make normal food.”

Ella and Lord Lasfam started to discuss the proposal. They agreed it was a good idea, but Lord Lasfam didn’t want strangers in the estate’s kitchen.

“Could they instead peel vegetables in the servants’ quarters?” Ella suggested.

“That sounds like a fair compromise.”

“We shouldn’t need more than two people for that.”

In the end, it was decided that Zack’s and Dimo’s wives would peel the vegetables. They went with Ella to the servants’ quarters.

Well, I guess they’ve got lunch sorted.

I spent a moment watching Tuuli move busily between the rooms given to the Gilberta Company and then looked around, wondering what Kamil was up to. I soon spotted him with the Plantin Company.

“Listen, Kamil—you won’t get many chances to explore the inside of a noble’s estate,” Lutz said. “Make the most of this one while you can. You can use the decor here as inspiration when furnishing the Italian restaurant, or you could make a tidy sum selling ideas to other aspiring high-class inns and stores. We’ll want to learn as much as we can for when we establish our store in the Sovereignty.”

“Right!” my son replied. Then he got straight to inspecting the house’s decorations.

Lutz gave a slight smile before turning to Lord Lasfam. “If you would allow me to ask, where might the books be? I’ve been making new Ehrenfest-style ones at Lady Rozemyne’s request, but we rarely have the opportunity to see traditional books.”

“Hmm... If you are especially careful not to dirty or damage them, I can show you where they are kept.”

“Believe me, I won’t let *anything* happen to those books,” Lutz replied, his expression gravely serious. “I’ve seen how Lady Rozemyne gets when someone doesn’t treat them with respect. Her

eyes change color and everything.”

Looking back, I couldn’t help but chuckle. Myne had always been such a nightmare at times like that.

“Mom, Mom!” Tuuli called. “Mrs. Corinna wants a hand, if you don’t mind. We’ve done everything we can to help Dad stay safe, so let’s keep ourselves busy for the time being.”

I went with my daughter to the sewing room, which was now packed with tools. Large pieces of cloth and a whole bunch of unfinished clothes were spread out over boxes.

“This is a lot...” I muttered. “Just how many outfits are you making?”

Myne had gone through an enormous growth spurt—I’d noticed it immediately on the day of Kamil’s baptism—but not even that could justify the sheer volume of clothes being worked on. There was way too much for any one person to wear, so maybe some of them were for other customers.

“As well as our own work, we brought some of the clothes entrusted to neighboring workshops,” Tuuli answered. “Lady Rozemyne’s order was too large for the Gilberta Company to manage alone. Oh, Mrs. Corinna—when can we expect the fitting?”

“Not until the war’s over, but I suspect they’ll want to arrange it as soon as they can. There really isn’t much time before the Archduke Conference.” Mrs. Corinna paused her work to look at me. “You can sew, yes? Can I rely on your assistance?”

My eyes widened in surprise. I was a decent seamstress, sure, but only in comparison to my neighbors. I was a dyer by trade, so I’d never sewn clothes meant for a noble.

“Should I really be working on an order like this...?” I asked. I wanted nothing more than to help make clothes for my beloved daughter, but the archducal family demanded perfection; a single mistake risked devastating the Gilberta Company’s reputation.

“Given the time constraints, we don’t have much of a choice. Besides, keeping busy should put you more at ease than sitting around with nothing to do. Can we count on you? The design’s right here.”

My hands trembled as I took some cloth and the design document from Mrs. Corinna, but I did my best to steady them as I got to work. I was using borrowed tools, and Tuuli was making a hairpin beside me.

I poured my heart and soul into every stitch... praying that both

Myne and Gunther would return home safe.

Gunther — A Promise Fulfilled

“Hey! Gunther!” the west commander shouted. “Today’s shipment’s here for you. Bring the apprentices along.”

“Right. Just give me a chance to plug my nose.”

Because I’d agreed to leave Ehrenfest with Lady Rozemyne, I’d needed to put in my notice with the city’s garrison. They’d demoted me to the rank of captain again in preparation for my departure—which was expected to happen at the end of spring—so I now spent most of my time looking after the apprentices.

“Seriously? Another shipment?” they asked when I told them the news, all grimacing. It was hard to blame them; necessary or not, our work was exhausting.

We all took a moment to plug our noses. Then, covering our mouths with cloth, we grabbed the newly delivered barrel.

“Gah, it reeks!”

“D’you think we don’t know that? Shut up and get moving.”

The knights had told those of us at the west gate to start collecting excrement, which we were supposed to dump on the heads of any invaders who tried to force their way into the city. Of course, that was only the first step of our battle plan; people dressed in silver were immune to the mana attacks nobles used, so we commoners had been told to ready our weapons and join the battle.

“Those knights have it easy...” one of the apprentices griped. “All they had to do was give an order. *We’re* the ones who actually have to collect this crap.”

“Hard to believe a *noble* came up with a plan like this,” another added. “They must’ve been a real monster.”

I stayed silent, trying to focus on the job at hand. If no ordinary noble would come up with a scheme like this, then it had probably come from Myne. I really didn’t know how to feel about that.

Nah, nah... It couldn’t have been Myne.

My adorable daughter would never have come up with such a disgusting idea. Back home, she’d always been obsessively clean.

“Oy. Don’t complain about the nobles when there’s a chance one might hear you,” I warned. “Lady Rozemyne and Lord Damuel might be protecting us, but don’t get cocky—annoy the wrong noble and your head might roll before word even reaches them.”

The apprentices fell silent; it wasn't rare for nobles to kill commoners over the slightest inconvenience. They also knew I was speaking from experience since my daughter had, for all intents and purposes, died at the hands of an arrogant noble.

"Look," I continued. "This ain't pleasant work by any means, but we're doing it for a good reason. The duchy's being invaded right now. Some of our Knight's Order had to rush to the border a couple days ago, and who knows when the enemy might show up on our doorstep?"

Our commander had told us the invaders were trying to reach the Noble's Quarter, which explained why there were so many knights hanging around the gates these days. They were so suspicious of anyone trying to get into the city that even merchants here on business from other towns were being thoroughly inspected.

"Plus, the knights said they'd tell us if something big happens. How much of an improvement is that? Not too long ago, they wouldn't have given us commoners a second thought."

Slowly but surely, the city of Ehrenfest was changing. Lord Damuel was keeping us in the know, and the knights were paying attention to *all* the gates, not just the north one. I glared at the apprentices, wanting them to realize how lucky they were, and they all winced in response.

"This is the part where you tell us *Lady Rozemyne's* the only one who would do this much for commoners, right?" one of them asked. "We get it. *And* she cleaned the whole city."

"Seems like there are plenty of considerate nobles these days. I was told they invite merchants to the temple for business meetings."

"And you know who made that happen?" I demanded. "Lady Rozemyne—the High Bishop!"

"Yeah, yeah. We know how much you worship her, Captain. How about we just work in silence? We won't complain anymore."

The apprentices shut me down the moment I tried to focus our conversation on Lady Rozemyne. I really wanted to brag about my daughter some more, but few people actually cared to listen.

Once we'd moved the waste, we removed our shirts and started scrubbing ourselves as quickly as we could. The water was still cold at this time of year, but how else were we supposed to get rid of the

stench?

“You lot!” a passing knight called. He must have thought we were taking a break. “Can you tell me when the ship from Leisegang is due to arrive?!”

I glanced over at my apprentices before I replied, “There are several that come here from Leisegang. Some arrived yesterday. More will come today. They normally start appearing around noon.” I was doing my best to sound proper, as I always did in situations like this.

“That doesn’t help. Tell the guards to be especially suspicious of anyone coming in from Leisegang. Do you understand me?”

The knight spoke sharply and with a tense look in his eyes; our enemies must have boarded a vessel at Leisegang. I was reminded of the eastern commander whose communication error had allowed that noble from another duchy to worm his way into the city. The faster we informed the others, the better.

“I’ll go spread the word,” I told the apprentices. “If anything happens while I’m gone, start the evacuation. You all know which streets you’re meant to cover, right? Triple-check them. Something tells me the time’s finally come.”

I gave my body a quick wipe and then rushed to inform the commander, not even bothering to put my shirt back on.

“There’s a ship about to arrive. Anyone who’s free, watch the gate.”

Each time a boat came into view, the crowd at the gate swelled. We’d been instructed to keep an eye out for anyone who carried themselves like a noble or—more importantly—arrived dressed in silver. Even the slightest cause for concern had to be reported to the knights.

“This one’s meant to be carrying a lot of rich merchants, right? Sounds like the perfect place for nobles looking to blend in. Keep a close eye on them.”

Some cheap ships prioritized their merchandise, forcing the people on board to cram themselves into corners and the like, whereas more expensive ones had dedicated rooms for their passengers. The vessel now docking—which had come here from Leisegang—was full of rich merchants, so it went without saying which category it belonged to.

“You boarded at Leisegang, but where are you from?” I asked

the first of our new arrivals as they reached the gate. “If you’re a merchant, show us your guild card. And what store are you here to do business with?” Nobles weren’t always easy to distinguish from servant-swarmed merchants, so it was important to gather as much information as we could.

“I am Laugo, a Gerlach merchant,” the man replied in short order, then showed me his guild card. “I deal in plants and came to discuss selling spring herbs as an ingredient for dyes. The ship containing my merchandise should arrive around noon. For now, I intend to visit Vita’s apothecary on the main street and the ink workshop. I am going to be staying at the Doltas Inn, as I always do.”

I recognized this Laugo guy—I’d seen him several times before—and the answers he gave all checked out. It was rare to see him without any servants or attendants, but a lot of merchants assigned their personnel to the ship carrying their product. I nodded and let him through.

The next merchant waiting outside then entered. I gave him the same set of questions as the first and carefully inspected his servants in case any of them were nobles in disguise.

The line’s long enough already. And there’s another ship arriving at noon?

Today wasn’t going to be easy. I tried to psych myself up—and that was when third bell rang.

Gong... Gong...

It wasn’t much later that a knight arrived and ordered us to evacuate the commoners; they had it on good authority that the ship due to arrive at noon was carrying invaders. Nobody had seen our suspects disembark, so we needed to be on high alert.

“Gunther, take the apprentices and start your rounds,” the commander instructed. “We’ll get ourselves ready for a fight.”

Following our orders, the apprentices and I sprinted outside. It was standard procedure to head straight to the other gates to spread news of the danger, but that wasn’t necessary this time; the nobles were keeping each other up to date using white birds.

“Remember your sections!” I shouted.

We started with wells, telling the workers and residents gathered there to evacuate. My section was the area around the central plaza, which included the city’s guilds, but I spread the news to anyone and everyone I saw along the way.

“There’s a ship of enemy nobles headed straight for the city. It’s gonna be dangerous here, so make sure you’re home before fourth bell. Don’t go outside until the fighting’s over.”

I did my best to hurry along the parents enjoying the plaza and the apprentices running errands. Some merchants were setting up their food stalls, but I told them to put their wares away and rush home as soon as they could.

“This won’t be some harmless tussle between drunks,” I said. “Nobles are gonna be shooting magic at each other! The knights have said they’ll try to lead the enemy to the Noble’s Quarter, but that doesn’t mean it won’t be dangerous—and they certainly won’t compensate you for any damage to your merchandise. So pack it away and go!”

Next, I threw open the doors of workshops along the street and shouted inside: “Your jobs aren’t more important than your lives! Close up shop and either hunker down or go home! There’s a dangerous ship arriving at noon!”

It was quite a ways from the main street, but I also stopped by Effa’s workshop. To my surprise, it was empty apart from a few people, and all the work tools had already been put away.

“Oh, is that you, Gunther? Thanks for coming, but we’re one step ahead of you. Your boy told us to evacuate a while ago.”

As it turned out, Kamil had known about the situation ahead of us, and my darling wife had already evacuated. I’d heard that Lady Rozemyne’s personnel and the Plantin Company were being relocated together, and while I wasn’t sure where they’d gone, there wasn’t a doubt in my mind that they were safe. I could join the fight without having to worry about them.

By the time I finished circling the buildings by the plaza, the main street was swarmed with people heading home. As I called out for them to be careful, my eyes wandered to the temple gate in the distance. Was that where Myne was now? Or was she in the castle? Given the circumstances, I sincerely hoped that she was safe.

Still... Nobles from another duchy, huh?

I was hit with a wave of bitterness as I remembered the day Myne was taken from me. What if something like that happened again? The very thought made my entire body tense up.

Gah! This time, I’ll stop them at the gate! They’re not getting in my city!

We knew exactly when the threat was going to arrive. I

squeezed the charm Myne had given me; I wouldn't let any bad actors reach her in the temple or castle.

It was close to noon when the clamor of the evacuation finally settled down. I quickly double-checked to make sure I hadn't missed anyone, then went back to the west gate.

"You sure took your time, Gunther. Lord Damuel's waiting for you."

"Lord Damuel?!"

The soldiers assumed I knew Lady Rozemyne's guard knights from our trips to Hasse. Really, though, I'd met Lord Damuel way back when Myne was still an apprentice shrine maiden.

"Here I am," I said as I entered the knights' waiting room, feeling tense. "I was told you have some business with me..."

Lord Damuel had been going over something with the knights when I arrived, but he said, "Right" and came over to see me. We exited the room together to speak privately.

"Lady Rozemyne asked me to protect her family and the lower city..." he began. "To that end, I participated in the evacuation of her personnel, your family included. You don't need to worry—I made sure they reached their destination safely."

"Thank you."

"And when I did, they gave me these."

Lord Damuel took three charms from a pouch on his hip—the same charms Effa, Tuuli, and Kamil had worn nonstop ever since we'd received them from Lady Rozemyne. We'd been told they would protect us from anything that might do us harm, so why were they here? I wasn't sure what to think.

"These are..."

"Your family is under the protection of a powerful magic tool Lady Rozemyne made. They asked me to give you their charms to make sure you were just as safe."

My family was as worried about me as I was about them—these charms proved that more than anything. I could feel the flames of love blazing in my heart as I put them on.

"How is Lady Rozemyne?" I asked. "Is that tool you mentioned protecting her too?" Even if she couldn't interact with Effa and the others as family, I wanted to know they were together during this crisis.

Lord Damuel gave a half smile and shook his head. "Lady Rozemyne is the archduke's adopted daughter; she's currently

leading a group of knights to defend Ehrenfest and everyone she cares about.”

All of a sudden, Myne’s old promise flashed through my mind: *“My name’s going to change, and I can’t call you ‘Dad’ anymore, but... I’ll always be your daughter. I’ll protect this city, and you, and everyone. I will.”* She’d chosen to become a noble to protect us, and it was because of her sacrifice that we’d managed to live this long without being torn apart by the nobility.

And now she’d *literally* charged into battle for us.

I couldn’t be more proud. That’s my daughter.

The thought that she was trying so hard to keep her promise to protect the whole city was enough to bring a tear to my eye. She was fighting to protect her family.

“Stay safe, Gunther—for Lady Rozemyne’s sake as well as your own. Fight well, and may Angriff guide you.”

I couldn’t help but notice the concern in Lord Damuel’s voice. Myne was the reason we’d met in the first place, and it seemed that my being a commoner hadn’t stopped him from worrying about me.

“Thank you,” I said, wiping the tears from my eyes. “My family’s message has been received loud and clear. Let’s protect this city together—and may Angriff guide you too.”

I stood up straight and tapped my fist twice against my left breast. As a retainer serving the archduke’s family, Lord Damuel was going to be on the front lines, fighting a far more dangerous battle than any of us soldiers.

“We won’t fail,” he replied, tapping his chest twice in response.

Together with the other soldiers, I readied the waste we’d gathered and got into position.

“There’s the ship,” I said. The ones from Leisegang were big and therefore easy to recognize. We kept a close eye on the passengers as they disembarked.

“I see silver cloth! They’re wearing something under their capes!”

“Are those dogs with them?”

Just as we’d been warned, some of the passengers were wearing silver cloth. Those must have been the intruders hoping to target the archducal family. Myne’s enemies.

Come on already...

They were moving so slowly it was driving me crazy. Leckle,

the soldier standing in wait beside me, twitched with impatience.

“Don’t dump it yet, Leckle,” I said, urging him to resist his temptations while fighting back my own. “If we strike too early and miss, we won’t get another chance. These are nobles we’re dealing with, remember—they can use highbeasts and magic. Our job is to drop waste on them and tear away their silver clothes. Make it count.”

The last thing we wanted to do was get cocky and start assuming we could take these nobles on ourselves. They had tools and magic we commoners could never even dream of.

Gong... Gong...

Fourth bell rang as our silver-clothed visitors reached the gate. By some strange coincidence—or maybe even fate—the city had marked the start of our battle.

“I’m gonna protect this city and my whole family with it.”

Follow Your Heart

“I wonder, how long will it be before your mana runs dry?” Detlinde mused aloud. “I do hope I can obtain the Grutrissheit before then...” She shot me one last glance before leaving the room, her shoes clacking on the hard ground as she went.

To that fool, neither the royal decree nor my status as an archducal family member meant anything. I should never have operated under the assumption that she was a noble—not when she only ever followed her own desires. Had I accounted for that, I probably would have had the upper hand right now. I could have taken her to a back room, stripped away her mana-resistant silver clothes, removed her veil that presumably had silver thread woven into it, and incinerated her Veronica-esque face with the hottest fire magic I could produce.

To my frustration, that option was no longer available to me; Letizia had struck me with poison. It must have been especially potent, as despite my antitoxin and the protective circles within Rozemyne’s charms, my body was completely paralyzed.

Detlinde did call it instant-death poison.

I understood that Letizia had been manipulated, but that did not stop me from feeling sincerely disappointed in her. I had said to her that Roswitha’s disappearance was most likely the result of a scheme and that she should stay well away from it, but her ignorance had led her to oppose me anyway. By falling for the enemy’s trap and participating in a murder, she had gone from being someone who deserved an education but needed to be shielded from malice to a fool who ignored orders and acted without rhyme or reason.

This is useless. Completely useless.

Letizia’s young age was no excuse; even as a child, Wilfried had been punished for entering the Ivory Tower without permission and for attempting to rescue a prisoner. The duchy had been caught in a schism at the time, but that did not change the fact he had nearly been disinherited over it.

Letizia was a member of Ahrensbach's archducal family. To make matters worse, she had come here without parents and stepped straight into the firing line of two powerful enemies eager for her elimination. Her position had been precarious enough already—what punishment would she receive for murdering her tutor by royal decree, an archducal family member from another duchy? Even in the best scenario, she would not be the only one executed.

Never have I seen an archducal family member so tragically unaware.

Just how many retainers would need to be punished alongside Letizia? And what about the nobles of her faction who would be deemed guilty by association? It was impossible to calculate how much damage this whole incident would cause; Detlinde and Georgine would not give up such a great opportunity to wreak havoc.

As for Roswitha, she would most likely be killed to ensure her silence. There was no chance she would ever be freed, and even if she were, she would return to find that her imprisonment had driven Letizia to commit murder and then be punished alongside her. I could not even begin to imagine the depths to which her despair would take her.

In truth, my heart went out not to Letizia but to her retainers—they had been doomed entirely by their lady's foolish actions.

Were Eckhart and Justus able to escape, I wonder?

Thinking about Letizia's retainers made me ponder what was happening to my own. If they stayed here in Ahrensbach, chances were they would be swept up in this whole mess. If worse came to worst, they might have Letizia's crimes forced on them as well. The most I could do now was pray their name stones had reached them and that they would save themselves by undoing the vows. They would probably deduce the circumstances, but they had no hope of reaching me here. And even if they explained my situation to Ehrenfest, it would be impossible to save me. I simply hoped that those who had always been so loyal to me would get to spend the rest of their lives at peace in their home duchy.

Tomorrow at noon, I would say.

That was when my mana would run out. Would Eckhart and Justus make it to Ehrenfest and free Lasfam's stone before then? That was my main concern.

“I do not fear the danger. Please bring me with you,” Lasfam had said to me, only to be told to stay in my estate and protect my belongings. I had intended to summon him with all of my luggage once I was more secure, but that would no longer be happening. Was he going to resent me for failing to keep our promise?

On second thought, I suppose Eckhart and Justus will return to enact revenge.

My retainers aside, almost everyone would rejoice at the news of my death. There were Detlinde and Georgine, of course, but also the Zent who had ordered my move to Ahrensbach in the first place. The royals and Sovereign nobles would surely be relieved to hear that I could no longer use Rozemyne to search for the Gruttrissheit, as they all suspected.

Rozemyne would mourn me, but Erwaermen had ordered her to kill me to finish her Book of Mestionora. She would most likely be relieved to obtain the missing section without having to endure the torture of us fighting each other. That young woman had an unusually low tolerance for death, but the entire country would collapse without my demise. She was a passionate lover of books, so maybe she had pieced together my intentions for the maximal-quality fey paper.

Aah, and warning Sylvester is no longer an option.

It had been Georgine’s idea to manipulate Letizia, meaning *she* was the reason for my current predicament. No doubt she was already on her way to Ehrenfest under the guise of attending Spring Prayer. That intelligence was missing from the letters Eckhart and Justus were trying to deliver; I wondered whether they would figure out the truth on their own.

“I ask of you, brought to me by the Goddess of Time... protect Sylvester, and protect Ehrenfest.”

I recalled my father’s last words to me. Despite having come to Ahrensbach to keep an eye on Georgine, I was unable to warn Sylvester of the greatest threat she now posed. At once, the voice in my head changed to that of Veronica.

“What use does the archducal family have for a worthless member who produces no results? Raising them sounds like a waste of resources. Their life would not be valuable in the slightest.”

Veronica had been correct, it seemed. I was useless when it mattered most.

Forgive me, Father. I could not protect Ehrenfest and Sylvester as

you asked.

One by one, faces came to mind and then faded. My vision blurred, and my consciousness slipped away. Even keeping my eyes open became an insurmountable task. My only option was to stop resisting the pain—and with that, my entire body relaxed.

I had closed my eyes only for a moment, but it felt like an eternity had passed. Stranger still, I noticed that the ceaseless pull of my mana being sucked away had suddenly stopped. No, not just that—I had been enveloped in someone else's mana.

My name has been stolen?!

Being enveloped in another's mana was not a new experience for me. Unlike when I gave my name to my father, however, there was no pain during this binding. The mana surrounding me was the same as the mana that had protected me when Letizia's poison had activated Rozemyne's charm.

I technically *had* entrusted my name stone to Rozemyne by hiding it within the false bottom of a bag—but that stone had the name “Quinta” carved into it, not “Ferdinand.” Moreover, she was strongly against taking names and bearing the burden of other people's lives. She would never have considered stealing the name of someone she did not know.

Before I could recover from my shock, Rozemyne's voice resounded throughout my mind: *“Don't give up, Ferdinand. I'm coming to save you, and there's nothing that can stop me. Live.”*

The fool. What kind of an order was that?!

I tried to resist on an unconscious level and was immediately overcome with pain—not from the poison but from a strange sensation as if my “master” was choking me with her mana. I grunted out my acknowledgment of her command.

Fine. I will use any means at my disposal to live.

The moment I accepted Rozemyne's order, the pain disappeared. The feeling of my name being bound was instant, and despite not having seen who had stolen my name, I was already being told what to do. On top of that, my acknowledgment had been accepted without me needing to say anything. A mere *grunt* had sufficed. The terror of having my name stolen made me want to sigh, but all that came out was a labored breath.

I am to blame for sending her my name stone to begin with... but Justus must have given her a push.

Rozemyne was strongly against taking other people's names, but Justus always had his ways. He knew she could use her mana to delay my demise and that the girl in question loathed letting others die even more than she did taking their lives into her own hands. It would have been easy to convince her. No doubt she had taken my name with the sole intention of saving me.

Rozemyne would order me to live when the gods want one of us to die?

I suspected she had not even considered that. She could have simply waited, and my wisdom would have become hers. If we both lived, we would eventually need to fight to the death as the gods demanded. Erwaermen must have told her the same thing he had told me, yet she was still prioritizing my life. As always, I could describe her only as a fool who acted according to her emotions.

At the same time, though, I was relieved to know she did not want my death. She still saw me as family—at least to some degree.

Still... She commands me to "live," does she?

As the shock of my name being taken faded, so, too, did my consciousness. Glimpses of the past started to wander into my mind.

"You will be able to live as you please. You will have the freedom to follow your heart, find a dream, and shape your own life..." said the woman who had given me the name "Ferdinand" in the Adalgisa villa. I had been told she was my mother, but at the time, the very concept had been foreign to me. In my mind, she had also only ever spoken to me on that one occasion.

During that one exchange, my "mother" had told me I would be able to lead my own life. But I had not known what it meant to live freely or to have dreams. My whole existence had been spent preparing to become a feystone, and not once had I considered what I would do if that fate never came.

"Lady Irmhilde, what is a dream?" I had asked upon being moved to Ehrenfest. She was my guardian at the time, and my father's paternal half-sister. She had passed away before my baptism, but if she had lived, she would have become my father's second wife and my noble mother.

Lady Irmhilde had touched her pale, loosely bound hair in thought. "It is the desire for things to be a certain way. Is there anything you wish for, Ferdinand?"

"I think I can live freely now, with my own dreams... but what are my dreams?"

“It sounds to me like you do not have any at the moment. You may not know them now, but you will one day. Once you have found the things you desire, live to make them come true and protect them.”

Lady Irmhilde had answered in a kind voice and tried to stroke my cheek as she answered, but her movements were somewhat awkward; she was not used to interacting with children. Smiles had been such a rare sight for me at the time that I recalled staring into her golden-brownish eyes, awestruck.

In the end, what did I desire?

Maybe because I was on the border between life and death, memories that had previously been pushed to the furthest reaches of my mind resurfaced. I had been with Lady Irmhilde only for a short while, so I did not remember much about her. For the most part, I recalled what people had told me about her once she was gone.

“Lady Irmhilde, why am I here?”

“Because someone wished for you to live, Ferdinand. My own wish is for you to keep living, grow up healthy, and one day meet that person.”

I still did not know whom Lady Irmhilde had wanted me to meet, but the memory of our exchange had always been vivid in my mind. It had served as a great source of comfort when Veronica had continuously called me a blight on Ehrenfest. In the Adalgisa villa, I had been nothing more than a feystone.

I suspect I will die without ever seeing this person Lady Irmhilde wanted me to meet.

As my mind continued to wander, I suddenly noticed that the magic circle was draining less of my mana. That was probably because Rozemyne had ordered me to live and was surrounding me with her own mana. As frustrated as I was that my name had been stolen, this certainly would delay my death to some degree.

Though I would not consider that a reason to be hopeful.

It would mean a slightly extended life span but not my survival; the poison had yet to be completely removed from my system, so I was still unable to move. I was more likely to be finished off than saved, especially when the only ones currently capable of entering this place were Letizia, Detlinde, and Georgine—those who wished me nothing but harm.

If only I could move my hands.

Although my schtappe was sealed, I still had magic tools at my disposal. Rozemyne's charm also had a purification circle. If I could somehow stop the mana flowing out of me and charge my tools, I would actually be able to purify the poison.

I tried to move my hands. They merely trembled, but it must have worked to some degree; the magic circle began draining even less of my mana. It was a decent start, but alas, that was the end of my resistance. My vision grew darker until the world around me had completely disappeared.

I awoke to a sudden flood of water. The merciless waves swallowed me and threw me up into the air, leaving me unable to breathe. It had all happened so suddenly that I couldn't even begin to comprehend what was going on.

Have they at last come to finish me?!

That was my initial thought, but the water lasted only a few moments before it disappeared. I came out the other end dry as a bone, which meant it must have been a waschen—even in my dazed state, I was able to piece together that much. As I coughed and spluttered, I realized the caster had probably been trying to cleanse the room of poison; it was much easier to breathe all of a sudden.

Is that sound...?

I could tell that someone had entered, but I could neither move my head nor open my eyes. My ears must have been damaged as well; I was having to rely solely on the vibrations of what I discerned to be footsteps. The weight of each one made it clear that this was no mere child.

That would mean this is Detlinde or Georgine, I suppose.

Whoever it was, my executioner moved me before pouring some liquid into my mouth. My hand was no longer on the replenishment circle, and at once, mana flowed into my magic tools and charm instead. Any last traces of the old poison were cleansed, and whatever poison had just been administered to me would soon meet the same fate—assuming it was of the normal variety. A tense moment passed as I waited for it all to leave my system, feeling my mana flow through me once again... until another, more intense liquid was poured into my mouth.

Ngh! What is this poison?!

I spat out the vile liquid and, using as much strength as I could muster, moved my wooden body enough to pin down my attacker.

Rozemyne had ordered me to live; I needed to eliminate any threats by whatever means necessary.

“Who are you?” I demanded, narrowing my blurry eyes in an attempt to focus them. I could not tell which of my three potential attackers had come to finish the job.

Looking back at me were two wide golden eyes. The word “Rozemyne!” reached my ears, and while it was ever so faint, the voice did sound somewhat similar to hers. The figure before me looked nothing like her, though—and above all else, Rozemyne would never have been granted access to this room in the first place.

“Impossible. Rozemyne is only this tall,” I said, still on guard but trying to relax the chains I had intended to choke her with. My body did not move as I wanted, however; it would be a while yet before the purification process finished, as my still pained gasps made apparent.

“What?! How is it impossible?!” the woman shouted, sitting up so suddenly that she drove the chain into her own neck. “Guh!”

Ah. Yes. That certainly is Rozemyne.

The moment I was convinced of that fact, the tension and suspicion that had driven me disappeared. I flopped onto my side and stared at Rozemyne, who had tears in her eyes and was spluttering to no end. She had changed too much for a basic remark such as “You certainly have grown.” It looked like she had aged four or maybe five years all at once, which was anything but a normal growth spurt. She had also become so beautiful that I struggled to believe my eyes. It was a transformation so abnormal that it could no longer be understood through human reasoning.

So the gods must have intervened.

It was clear as day that Erwaermen favored Rozemyne over me. Something must have happened during her trip to the Garden of Beginnings that would explain this almost artificial beauty she had suddenly acquired. It appeared to me that her features were perfect in the most literal sense, lacking any of the distortion or asymmetry that normally developed over the course of one’s life. I could only sigh that she would sully this literal gift from the gods with her unseemly behavior.

“Have you lost your mind...?” I asked. “You fool.”

Her sudden decision to move straight into the chain stretched across her neck had not been the only issue. From visiting

Erwaermen to rescuing me against my will to accessing this room through some means I could not even begin to fathom, her every move exposed her as a fool.

“Bwuh... Look, I already know that I took things a little too far. Please don’t get all sanctimonious about it.”

Even now, she was so oblivious to her own faults that she had described her actions as “a little” too far. Any lingering feelings of aggression faded as I realized she was completely unchanged on the inside.

Still, there can be no doubting her identity.

Rozemyne was so dense that she had yet to realize I had *deliberately* attempted to choke her. She was also wasting her beauty and stubbornly refusing to give up on anything she cared about. These were all grave flaws for a noblewoman to have, but for some reason, they did not displease me. I wondered why.

“Is it because you can’t move that you feel the need to run your mouth?” she asked.

“I ‘run my mouth’ because of the manner in which *you* administered the antidote. And if you want me to take your complaints seriously, I would advise wiping that great big smile from your face.”

Despite my warning her time and time again to keep her emotions hidden, Rozemyne was as easy to read as ever. She was slapping her cheeks at the moment, trying to regain some composure, but it was doing very little to help her case.

“I’m glad you’ve recovered enough to grumble,” she said, her golden eyes wrinkled in an ear-to-ear grin. Would I have rejoiced if she had lost that straightforward stare during her growth spurt? “As soon as you’re better, I expect some head pats, your sweetest ‘very good,’ and maybe even some hugs. You can also pinch my cheeks if you want. So please... Get better soon.”

I could not bring myself to critique her unusual display of simultaneously crying and smiling. It seemed that I cared more about her unchanged personality than her beautifully developed appearance.

And this is the person I am expected to kill to complete my Book of Mestionora...?

I recalled Erwaermen’s instructions and returned to my senses; there were some things one simply could not escape from.

“In the first place,” I said, “there was no need for you to come

to my rescue. Justus must have given you my message, so why are you here? To what end did you come?" It would have been far more intelligent of her to let me die, thereby saving Yurgenschmidt with as few deaths as possible. That was what Erwaermen desired, and it would have been much easier on Rozemyne than an outright duel to the death.

And yet she had never even considered leaving me to die.

"Hm? I mean, who cares?" she asked, cocking her head at me. "There's no point in saving Yurgenschmidt if you're not in it. Isn't that super obvious?"

I was at a loss for words; she had delivered that outrageous remark as though it were the most natural thing in the world. It had not slipped my mind that she had said I was like family to her and threatened to save me if ever I ended up in danger, yet her declaration that she would prioritize me over *the entire country* was hard to process.

"The greater duchies, the Sovereignty, the royal family, and even the gods themselves—I would make an enemy of the entire world to save you," she said.

"I do not believe you said 'the gods' before..."

In truth, it was a frivolous detail. Yurgenschmidt was home to her commoner family and her friends—the people she cared about more than anything. I had not fathomed she would prioritize my life over their safety.

Someone who is merely like family should never be placed above one's true kin. Is that not how it goes?

My father had called me his son but prioritized Veronica, Sylvester, and Bonifatius over me. Sylvester likewise called me his brother but cared more about Florencia and his children. Even after our father's death, he had determined it best for *me* to enter the temple, not Veronica.

I had always considered such favoritism the height of normalcy, so it had seemed obvious to me that Rozemyne would treat those who were only *like* family the same as everyone else did. Yes, I was special to her as a noble, and if something were to happen to me, she would rampage to save me as though we were related. But it had never even crossed my mind that she might continue to care for me when her true family's safety was on the other end of the scales.

My calculations never accounted for this.

"Oh, is this your first time hearing that part?" Rozemyne asked.

“My apologies, but that’s just how it is. Now, let us come up with a way to complete the Book of Mestionora without either one of us having to die.” The fool did not even acknowledge my emotions as she continued to joyfully babble on about Erwaermen. She even came out with the truly ridiculous idea of pouring mana into the country gates to buy ourselves more time.

I doubted Erwaermen had even considered the possibility that we would refuse to kill each other over the Book of Mestionora. He most likely considered it a given that mere humans from Yurgenschmidt would obey his commands.

Still, is Rozemyne not following her desires too carelessly?

I was equal parts exasperated and enthusiastic about seeing the shock on Erwaermen’s face when Rozemyne’s plans came to light. My lips curled into a slight grin, and it was then that I remembered what Lady Irmhilde had told me:

“Once you have found the things you desire, live to make them come true and protect them.”

Hm... Living in accordance with my own desires might not be a bad idea after all.

This time, I interpreted the words differently—perhaps because my strength was returning to me. I attempted to bend my fingers, conscious that the charm and antidote were gradually restoring me. And as I calculated how long I would need to wait before I could move freely again, I started to contemplate the most efficient way to destroy Ahrensbach.

Afterword

Hello again, it's Miya Kazuki. Thank you very much for reading *Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 5 Volume 8*.

This volume's prologue was from Justus's perspective and took place around the same time as the last volume's epilogue. The story depicted their journey from Ahrensbach to Ehrenfest and their conversation with Sylvester after being informed that their lord was in danger. They both have some pretty violent thoughts, don't they? Writing this chapter made that all too clear to me.

The main story began with Rozemyne's battle preparations. She reunited with Eckhart and Justus, then took a nap and got ready to sortie. She used the Book of Mestionora to its fullest, exploited the country gates for speedy travel, and even managed to get Dunkelfelger's knights on her side. Please continue to cheer for her as she makes good on her promise: "I'll do anything to save Ferdinand!"

Georgine then launched an attack on Ehrenfest, believing that Ferdinand was dead. Matthias learned that his home province was under attack by his own father, who had ruled it as a giebe for years and years. Can he beat Grausam to save Gerlach...?

This volume's epilogue was written from Georgine's perspective. I took care to include as much information about her plot and past as I could. I've said in previous stories how Sylvester feels about Georgine, but this was my first time covering how she sees him and Veronica, so it seemed pretty fresh. What kind of an influence did her mother and younger brother have on her while she was growing up?

There was only one traditional short story for this volume, but I think I've more than compensated for that with a slew of original short stories grouped together as "The Defense of Ehrenfest (First Half)." They were written to better convey what happened in Ehrenfest while Rozemyne was rushing to save Ferdinand. A lot of pretty nostalgic characters from Illgner and the lower city make appearances once again. I did my best with them, so please enjoy!

The last original short story focused on Ferdinand. I decided to write it to celebrate his pulling way ahead in the reader poll we did, but, well... I ended up having to trash a *lot* of potential outlines. Going into too much detail about his thoughts upon reuniting with Rozemyne or his emotions would have spoiled some upcoming revelations, so after racking my brain for what felt like forever, I settled on a sequence of flashbacks instead.

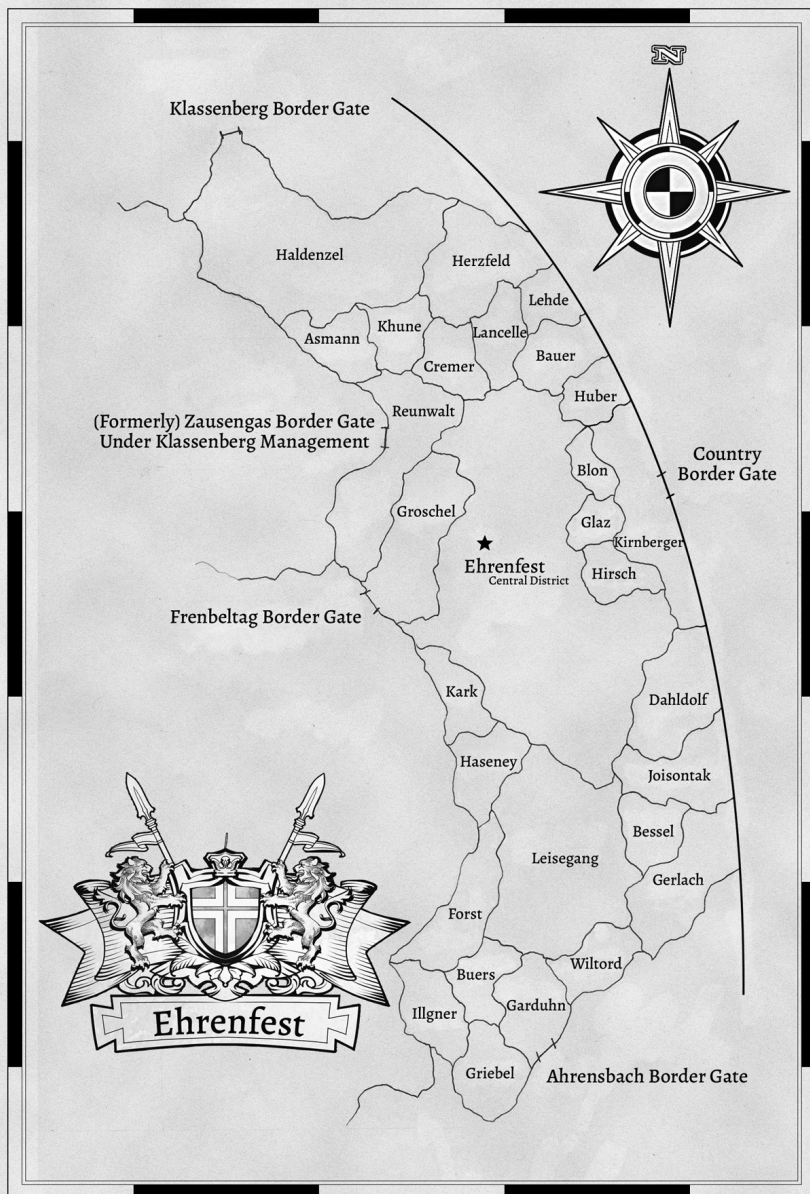
The bonus short story for the seventh drama CD was written from his perspective too. It detailed him visiting Erwaermen in an attempt to finish his Book of Mestionora.

This volume's cover art reflects the battle against Lanzenave. You can see Rozemyne using the aub's protection, Ferdinand with his two loyal retainers, and the heroic duo that is Heisshitze and Hannelore. The country gate and one of Lanzenave's ships are in the background. How cool is that?!

The color illustration depicts this volume's grand reunion. At first, I requested a collage of everyone fighting the Lanzenavians, including the retainers not featured on the cover, but Shiina-san asked me to reconsider, since it was essentially more of the same. She then had the brilliant idea of making the illustration mirror their separation in Part 4 Volume 9. Shiina-sama—thank you.

And finally, my utmost thanks to everyone who read this book. May we meet again in Part 5 Volume 9.

February 2022, Miya Kazuki



**END OF VOLUME
BONUSES!**

AAH...
YEAH, I
SEE THAT
NOW.

WE SIMPLY
CANNOT TAKE
THE RISK OF
SENDING OUR
KNIGHTS
HOME WHILE
THEY ARE THIS
WORKED UP...

HRAAAH!

DIT-TER!

A COMFY LIFE WITH MY FAMILY

Art by You Shiina

DIT-TER!

DIT-TER!

DIT-TER

017-161:

CLINK

CLANK

CLUNK

OVERWHELMING LUST FOR BATTLE

**BY ANY
MEANS
NECES-
SARY!**

I
WILL
SAVE
LORD
FERDI-
NAND!

BUT THEN!

BA-

DUM

ALL ABOUT FERDINAND

**ECKHART
DOES
KIND OF
LOVE HIS
SIBLINGS.**

**HIS
DEVOTION
TO HIS
LORD
ASIDE...**

WELL
SAID,
DEAR
SISTER!

SHINE

2

2

ROZEMYNE

"I'll treat her as my little sister because my lord ordered me to."



CORNELIUS
Kind of cute due to
being the youngest."

**IN
ORDER
OF
PREFER-
ENCE...**

4

NIKOLAUS

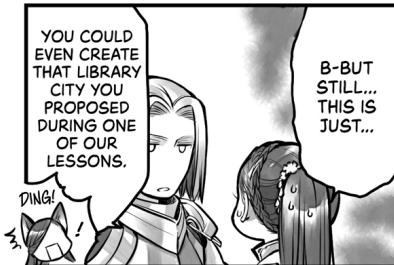
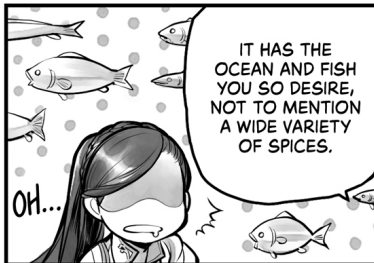
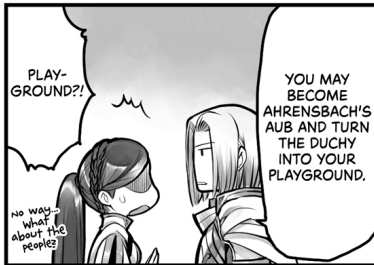
"Stay out of my sight if you want to live."

2

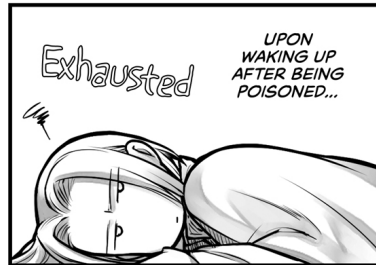
LAMPRECHT

"I wish he'd get a better grip."

CONFIRMATION



SUSPICIONS





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by Miya Kazuki

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Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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Original Japanese edition published in 2022 by TO Books, Tokyo.

This English edition is published by arrangement with TO Books, Tokyo

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Ebook edition 1.0: January 2024